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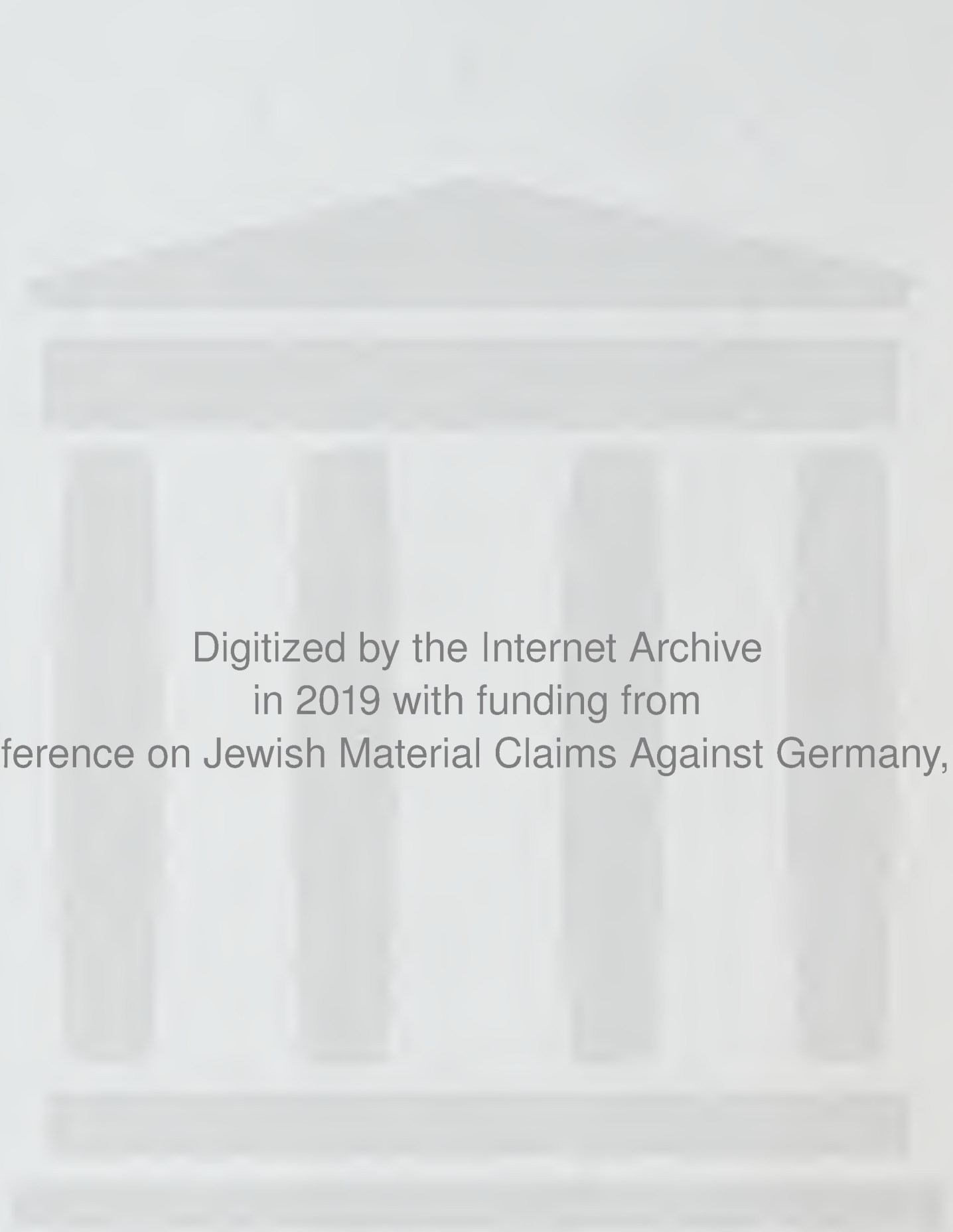


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CAUGHT !

THE STORY OF MY CHILDHOOD
AND
OTHER SAD TALES

BY

JOHN FREUND

by
R. H. M.

C A U G H T !

THE STORY OF MY CHILDHOOD AND OTHER SAD TALES

BY

J O H N F R E U N D



GREAT-GRANDFATHER
PROFESSOR JACOB JUNG
AND HIS WIFE, JOSEPHINE GLASS

- 1894 -



GRANDMOTHER ROSA FISCHOF
MARRIED TO
MAJOR ADOLF JUNG, AT LEFT,
WHO WAS IN THE HAPSBURG
ARMY OF THE AUSTRO-
HUNGARIAN EMPIRE

- 1914 -



J. POSSELT
PRAGUE-SMICHOV



HERMINE BONDY -
WHO MARRIED
ALEXANDER FREUND
- PHOTOGRAPHED
IN VIENNA



ERNA, LEOPOLD AND
ANDA JUNG

- CIRCA 1908 -



ERNA JUNG, AT 19
(LATER MARRIED TO DR.
GUSTAV FREUND)

- 1917 -



AREA JUDGE ALEXANDER FREUND



THE FREUNDS -
JAN (JOHN)
MOTHER,
FATHER AND
KAREL



THE FREUND
SONS:
JAN (JOHN)
AT LEFT, AND
KAREL





FATHER - GUSTAV
FREUND - AS
GARDENER

- 1941 -

JAN (JOHN)
AT ELEVEN



always knew some interesting gossip. S. gave me English lessons once a week in their elegant apartment near the Vltava.

Every Sunday, the same type of meal was served, right after the 12 o'clock news to daughter M. and her husband K. This time, we talked more of our immediate concerns : how to live in the post war society. K. was completely practical and unsentimental. He was straight to tell me when I did wrong. I was annoyed when too much conversation centred on that subject. I was impractical, sentimental, tending to daydream and did not like to be told. After all I was just sixteen. I knew that I had few friends. After all, football and hockey were not so important to me as to most others and when I read I liked to read what was close to me. K taught me Latin once a week in their apartment. K. and M. devoted greater effort to me and I knew they meant the right thing for me and they did care for me, but still I preferred the Saturday company.

I was introduced to music by Aunt and her family, when we all attended a gala concert devoted to Beethoven. From then on, I longed for more. I did not need company to stand in the stalls of the Smetana Hall or the Rudolfinum. All my sadness, rage and depression were revealed here and followed by the uplifting joy of the music. I discovered Opera, which as a combination of drama and music I considered to be the highest level of art. Quite often, on a Saturday afternoon, I attended a performance at the ornate National Theatre and then walked elated through the busy streets of the wonderful city. During one of our classes at school we were all required to prepare a short talk on any subject. I chose Beethoven, who struggled in his life and overcame his rage. After my talk, one of the brighter boys said that I was far too young to waste my interest on such subjects and I should leave this to "older women".

One day, my aunt told me that we were to be visited by Mrs Adler. My eyes lit up. The Adlers were people who moved to Budejovice after our country had to give up the Sudetenland in 1938. Fricsek, a year younger, became my friend and his pesky sister Hana a teasing object. My sad day was when they left after a year to escape the clutches of the Nazis. During the war they moved first to Norway, then Denmark, and finally to Sweden where they stayed to the end. Now Hugo, Fricsek's father, a TB specialist, returned to direct a spa in the northeastern part of Moravia. I was invited to spend my summer vacation with them. That meant a train journey with several stops and changes lasting an entire day.

Summer 1946 came. July I spent at a boy scout camp sharing a tent with a classmate, Pavel Gottlieb, a boy who remained my friend. His father had died in Auschwitz but Pavel spent the war with his mother in Prague. The camp was located at the edge of a forest along a meandering river. This was the summer during which political unrest in the world started again. The war had been over just a year ago and so many people suffered and lost their lives. Now, the talk was back on destruction. The great hero to so many and the mistrusted Dictator to others, Generalissimo Stalin was raging. In his own land he held tight control over the people and the army, and his quest to expand his



AUNT ANNA WEISS, AT LEFT

- 1948 -



ABOVE, AUNT ANDA FLECK

- 1948 -



LEFT, JOHN

- JUNE, 1945 -

MY STORY

BY JOHN FREUND

Table of Contents.

Introduction	I
I - a Poem	II
I Was One of the Lucky Few	1
Life 1945-1948	60
Klepy (Gossip)	72
Elly's Story	76
April	80
Yom Kippur in Auschwitz	83
The Hungarian Jewish Swine	87
My Friend Peter	91
The Gypsy Boy and I	94
At the Shores of the Vltava	97
Hijacked	105
Little Rudy on the Death Train	108
Hurrah! Here We Are Again	113
Caught	123
Dreams	126
Palm Reading	129
My Sweater	131
Golem, Update	133
Birkernau Recollections 1990	140
Reunion in Israel	148
Postscript	149
Conclusion	150

INTRODUCTION

Already as a young boy, I wanted to write.

In 1977, when my 15 year old daughter asked me to write about my life, I put my ideas into reality.

I did not write fantasies, but about events in my life, that people convinced me should be remembered.

Everything in this book is factual, although in my stories I attempted to fictionalize some actual events.

My first volume, I Was One Of The Lucky Few, was received by my readers positively and was used for a while as a tool in teaching about the Holocaust. I tried to relate to the young; particularly to those who were the age I was during the events covered in the book.

The two subsequent volumes of Stories Out Of My Life, consisted of narrations about my young family as well as extensions of events during my years in the Nazi camps in the Second World War..

In this book, there is little new, other than description of the postwar years and my coming to Canada. There are repetitions of certain events, such as setting the background for the stories.

I am now sixty years old, and as set out in the postscript of this volume, aware as I always was, that the end is in sight, but I don't know how far.

I
Born in 1936
as a Jew
in Europe
of wonderful parents
survived
as an orphan
in 1945

THEN
learned beauty of the mind,
music, reading and art,
of
nasty politics that eat at dignity,
at 18
I chose freedom
to stand on my own in
cold
Canada

Now
preparation for life over
I experience love with beloved wife
joy
at seeing my children grow up
proud and fearless
joy of travel

"Presented to John Freund in recognition of 25 years service"

What else do I need or deserve!

November 18, 1981

PART I

CHILDHOOD

Dear Carole:

You have asked me recently to write down for you something of my life "before" - I suppose you mean before you appeared on the scene.

As you know, I rarely speak about my childhood experiences, because they were so strange and difficult, and some I still cannot place properly in the right perspective. (Once - when I was 13 - I wrote a poem in the Ghetto Terezin, which translated loosely as follows:

It's already five years
Since into peace marched a devil.
Death has moved from house to house;
War brought terrible times.

Mothers and daughters light candles
Remembering those beloved
Whom they will never see again.

I have forgotten the rest of it, but the two main themes of peace (Life) and war (Misery) are there. So let me start with my childhood, in peace, before the time that the Devil walked in, i.e., 1939.

My childhood, as I remember it, was sweet; it had joy, adventure and occasionally, pain.] We - the Freunds - consisted of a father, Gustav; mother, Erna; my older brother, Karel; and me.* We lived in a town called České Budějovice (Budweiss, in German), which had 50,000 inhabitants, and is located at the junction of two rivers, the Vltava (Moldau) and the Malse, in southern Bohemia. One hundred miles, to the north of Budějovice, is the beautiful city of Prague, capital of Czechoslovakia.

As a small child, I enjoyed running and hiding in the dark. I loved the summer for splashing in the water, and the winter for playing in the snow. Later, I learned to swim and skate. We did a lot of things together as a family. My father was a paediatrician, and had a car, which was quite a rare thing in the early 1930's. On Sundays, we drove out of town into a nearby mountain range, Šumava. There we stopped, picnicked and climbed up the tallest mountain. Sometimes, there were other families with us and it was a lot of fun.

In the summer we moved - all except for Father - to a tiny village, near Šumava, and only 20 miles from Budějovice, and set up our household in a farmer's house. There we took walks in the forests, swam in small ponds - and I loved to sit at a large tree along a roadside, catching butterflies with my net.] I had an occasional friend among the village boys, and we did things together.

* At birth, I was given the name Hanus, which I later disliked so, that when I was 5, it was changed to Jan.

Our town was an old one. It was founded in the middle ages by a Count Budějov and that's where the name Budějovice came from. Like all towns, it had to protect itself from invaders during those early times. An old, crumbling wall still stands there, and right in the centre of the town, in one corner of a huge square, is a tall, black tower. It is called the Black Tower. All the boys living in Budějovice had to show their courage by climbing to the top of the tower on the narrow, winding staircase, in complete darkness.

(We lived in an apartment house near the town centre. The building was owned by a wealthy butcher, Mr. Kočer and his fat wife. They became rich during the First World War. They operated a butcher shop on the street level on Jirovcova Street No. 11, and that was our address from at least the time of my birth in 1930, until we were forced out in April, 1942.)

My brother, who was three years older, was a difficult child. He always kept taking things from me, and was hitting or kicking me, so that we always had fights. I was considered the good little boy, and he was the bad one.

One day, when I was seven years old, I almost killed my brother. Our apartment building had a small yard, with several garages. The yard was enclosed by a tall gate. My dear brother closed the gate behind me, leaving me in the yard. I pleaded to be let out - but when he laughed, I took the nearest rock, and threw it over the gate. It was a direct hit. Karel got a big gash on his head, and was bleeding badly. They rushed him to the hospital to sew up the cut. I was in - not for a beating, but for a long lecture. Even the

town Rabbi, old Dr. Ferda, was brought in to counsel me on my evil act: What if there had been a mother pushing a buggy and I had killed the baby . . . ?

Now, as you can see, Carole, our life was not beyond mischief. In fact, my parents were threatened with constant fear of being thrown out of the apartment because of their sons. Somehow, we attracted other rowdy boys. One day, the noise inside rose so high, that our landlady - the fat Mrs. ✓ Kocer - came up to knock on the door. No one dared to go and open it! After increased knocking, she broke through the front door - only to find boys in the apartment, sitting on wardrobes and hiding in corners. I was the closest, and so she chased me around our beautiful dining-room table. She held a nasty broom, and when she caught me, she let me have it!

My parents were relatively calm people, Mother especially. She was very small and pretty. I loved going shopping with her to the delicatessen stores located on the big square in the town. There, I always ended up with a fresh roll and thinly-sliced ~~hachama~~ ^{hachama}.

Mother liked to read, and went frequently to the library. She and some friends would discuss books. She seemed a sad person, and often stared into the distance. I think she missed her brother and sister, with whom she was so close. Her brother lived in Prague, and had an important government position in the Revenue Department. His name was Leopold, but they called him Poldi. He was married to Manja, a round-faced, pleasant person; and they had two girls. My mother's

really closest person was her sister, Anna, nicknamed Anda, who lived in Innsbruck, Austria. The two sisters always corresponded.

My mother's parents lived in Prague, but as I remember them, they were very old. Grandpa Adolf still wore the uniform of a Major of the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but he was quite deaf. Grandmother Rosa was very elegant. They say that she had come from a very rich, aristocratic family. I am going to tell you about Grandmother Rosa and Grandpa Adolf a bit later.

My mother's maiden name was Jung. The Jungs were what one would call progressive people. Uncle Leopold, their son, was sent to law school, and the daughters finished high school. My mother was very proud of her matriculation from a Gymnasium (High School). Both Mother and her sister, Anda, were very good pianists.

Mother was born and grew up in a small Czech town named Pisek. She had only Czech schools, and disliked it when people around her spoke German. I remember Mother playing Chopin waltzes; she maintained, however, that her sister, Anda, was a far better pianist.

That is where my parents thought that I had some talent, too, and they arranged for piano lessons for me. One of my teachers was a lady with the Old Testament name of Mrs. Jeremiah. Twenty-five years earlier, she had been my mother's teacher. I took piano lessons for three years, until 1941.

There is an interesting story about my great-grandfather Jacob Jung, my mother's grandfather. He was a high school teacher, teaching classical languages like Latin and Hebrew. His temper was terrible: One day, in great anger, he descended on one of his students and pulled at his ear so hard, that blood started to gush out of it. There was a scandal, but Professor Jung was forgiven, until the next time. And next time came, when his anger made him take a burning desk oil lamp (this was before electricity) and hurl it at a student dozing off in the class. That was the end; no more classes for the professor.

One of Jacob's sons, Adolf - a decent name before the great beast, Hitler, became known - ran away from home when he was eleven years old. He joined a local army camp as a shoeshine boy - and stayed on all his life. He rose through the ranks to become the Major, the rank he held in the then powerful (at least, before 1914) Austro-Hungarian Army. For a Jew, this was a very high position. He looked almost like the Emperor Franz Josef, the great leader of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which fell apart at the end of the First World War. This was my mother's father.

Grandma Rosa, Adolf's wife, was not the military type. She was beautiful, dark and proud of her Spanish heritage. Both of her parents died very young, and she was brought up by two wealthy uncles who lived in Roumania. The uncles owned the most beautiful house in the town - it stands until today, and is used as the headquarters of the Communist Party for the area.

Rosa was attended by servants, and the uncles insisted that she be taught properly, and not be spoiled. For her dowry, when she married the soldier Adolf, the son of an unemployed high school teacher, she received two thousand gold coins! Imagine! They were married in 1890, when Rosa was 17.

Rosa, whose name before her marriage was Fischhof, had a sister. I don't know her name, but the sister's daughter was Aunt Hansi Biener, who came to live in Toronto in 1950. Hansi, whom you probably remember, was very eccentric, terribly snobbish, and a great pianist. As a child, she travelled around the world with a group of musicians, and gave concerts in Detroit and Windsor, in the 1920s.

Aunt Hansi was proud to tell us that the Fischhofs were a well-known family in Vienna a long time ago, as Great-Great-Grandfather Fischhof was a famous music teacher at the Vienna Conservatory.

Anda, my mother's sister, who was also a beautiful girl, met her husband, Robert Fleck, on a train, around 1917. He was tall and handsome, and in an Austrian uniform, just like Anda's father. They were both young, and fell in love with each other. I don't know how religiously active my Grandparents Jung were, but it hurt them that their daughter, Anda, married away from the Jewish faith.

However, the marriage of Anda and Robert was the most wonderful relationship. Uncle Robert rose to the rank of Colonel - that's only one step below a General - and when the Germans occupied Austria in 1938, he was retired immediately because of his Jewish wife. He then devoted his life to

studying history and chemistry, and to protecting his wife, and his daughters, Eva and Pully, from persecution by the Nazis. Despite tribulations, they all succeeded in surviving the war. Aunt Anda was pale and thin, when she came to visit me in Prague in 1945.

After coming to Canada, I visited the Flecks in Innsbruck several times, and got to know them well. Uncle Robert was still conducting chemical experiments, when your mother and I visited them in 1962. Uncle Robert died in the late 1960's, at the age of nearly 80; and Aunt Anda died, in 1975, also at the age of 80. We attend services at her Yahrzeit each June, at Holy Blossom Temple.

Uncle Leopold Jung and all his family ended up in the Nazi gas chambers. There are no Jungs left in our family, but the Strohals (Eva and Richard) and the Wildauers (Pully and Otto) in Innsbruck are the daughters and sons-in-law of Uncle Robert and Aunt Anda, and the Freunds in Toronto are the son and daughter-in-law - and the granddaughters - of Erna and Gustav. Aunt Hansi Biener had just one son; his name is Erwin, and he lives in Toronto.

In Israel, at Kibbutz Givat Chaim, lives Aliza Schiller, whose mother was my first cousin. Completely by chance, we met Aliza while visiting this Kibbutz, where your mother has relatives, Chava and Pinda Shefa.

Now, let me tell you a bit about the Freunds.

My father laughed and joked a lot - yet he seemed sad. He was a children's doctor, and probably took on a lot of the worries of his patients' mothers. He visited daily, a

local cafe house, where he played cards. Children were not permitted in these smoke-filled, fancy club-rooms - and there the men played cards, read newspapers, and discussed politics, and who knows what? Father spoke Czech with a German accent, as he had studied in Berlin, and was a part of the German-speaking, Jewish population of Czechoslovakia.

When I was a little boy, I loved being sick, because his kindness was thus fully available to me. Father often spent hours with very sick children, encouraging them, and giving them confidence to recover from their illnesses; and more than once, stayed with a sick child day and night, until the worst was over.

Later on in life - when I was in Terezin - and he was a doctor in our living quarters, I was very proud to see him walking around in his white coat.

Father's family was rooted in our town. Grandfather Alexander - whom I never knew - was a county judge, and had his Chambers at the Budejovice City Hall, on the main square. People say that he was a really strange and strict character, often walking around the town, talking to himself. Alexander and his wife, Hermine, had six children: Franz, Anna, Gustav, Ernst, Else and Randa (Franceska). I suspect that the really strong person was my grandmother, Hermine.

Grandfather Alexander's father's name was Moses. He was a businessman, but I know nothing more about the Freunds, except that a brother of Moses went to England, and the family may still be there or may have moved to America.

Alexander's wife, Hermine, was of a family named Bondy. The Bondys were rich people, and owned a flour mill in Prague. The only one of the Bondys whom I remember was my Great-Grandmother, Veronika, Hermine's mother. She lived to be 102 years old, and died in Prague, in 1940. She lived there with her daughter, Hermine - my grandmother - in a very old, dirty apartment building, which belonged to them. It still stands in Prague, and we own a part of it; it is on Karlin Street.

When I was little, I was somewhat frightened at visiting the two old women, Veronika, and Hermine. The old lady was in her nineties then, and was always spitting something into a handkerchief. Now that I think of it, there were two other women living in that dark apartment on the fourth floor of the Karlin district in Prague. One was the faithful maid, and the other was an unmarried daughter of Hermine, my Aunt Randa. She was an old maid; a strange person. I don't know much about her, except that when they talked about her amongst the Freunds, it was only in whispers. She and her mother disappeared in the concentration camps.

If Aunt Randa was strange, her sister, Else, was stranger - and was never talked about when the children were present. The story is that this aunt believed in some supernatural powers, and had joined an organization which promoted that sort of thing. This was probably in the 1920s. She stopped looking after herself, began over-eating and drinking, and keeping bad company. Then, a man appeared in her life - some small-time crook. She went to live with him, to the disgust of

her family, in Berlin, Germany (he was interested in her money, not in her) and she became pregnant. This sad story ends with her dying in childbirth. What a family disgrace - it is no wonder that Aunt Else's name was never mentioned in front of the children!

Now, there was a third sister of my father. Her name is Anna. Always immaculately clean, self-assured, irrepressible, and full of elan, Aunt Anna was married young, to a self-assured, strict man, with glasses, Uncle Maximilian Weiss.

The Weisses lived in Prague, in a beautiful, large apartment building, which was so modern that it had an elevator, and you could press a button in the apartment to open the outside doors to the building lobby. There were only a few such up-to-date buildings in the world at that time.

Uncle Maximilian was a brilliant man. First, a professor at a well-known Business Academy (where, by coincidence, your Grandfather Heller was a student, and was taught by Uncle Max), later, he became a Director and Manager of a large bank. It was named the Union Bank. It was very rare for a Jew to have such an important position. Uncle Max was from a humble, observant family, but he did not pass much religion on to his children.

Ah, yes - the Weisses were better-class people, and they did not like to visit the doctor brother, Gustl, in Budejovice, with his "blue-stockings" wife, who would rather read and play the piano, than occupy herself with all of the routine of housekeeping; - and don't forget, their two bratty boys.

Even so, the Weisses were people one should admire.

They had three children: two boys, Willie and Hans; and a daughter, Marianne. Willie was, like his father, a brilliant man. He became a lawyer. During the war, he was hiding in Prague, in the apartment of a girl-friend, Sylva, whom he later married. He survived the war, but died later of some sickness. The younger brother, Hans, was the kindest of them. He lost one eye as a child, in an accident, with scissors. I used to see him in Terezin. He was a chef there, and when I got to him at times, he would slip some food to me. Hans went to Auschwitz, and died there.

The sister, Marianne, and her parents, Max and Anna, stayed in Terezin until the end of the war. This was almost a miracle.

Uncle Max, Aunt Anna and Marianne returned home to Prague after the war, and Max died soon afterwards. Aunt Anna and her daughter, Marianne, lived in Prague again; believe it or not, once again, in the same, pre-war, beautiful modern apartment building, with the elevator, and the automatic doors at the entrance. It wasn't almost a miracle - it was a miracle!

Marianne married a childhood friend, Charles Landa.

Aunt Anna gave me a home in this apartment, after the war, when I returned to Prague as an orphan, and I lived with her for three years until I left for Canada in 1948. Aunt Anna - or Teta, as we call her (it means "aunt" in Czech)

is now almost 90. She lives with her daughter and son-in-law, Marianne and Charles Landa, in Toronto. The Landas' two daughters, Jean and Dinah, are now grown up.

Now, to complete the Freunds. Uncle Ernst, my father's youngest brother, and his wife, Aunt Mitzi, and their daughter, Eva, all left Europe in 1939, just in time to avoid the terrible troubles. They settled in New York, and changed their family name to Forgan. Of course, you know them. Eva, who is my age, married a very nice man, Edgar Merkel. They have two boys, Stephen and Peter.

The last of the Freunds was the oldest brother of my father. His name was Franz. He was always full of jokes, and talked very loudly. He made a living as a soap salesman. Franz, his wife, Irma, and two children, Freddie and Fanci, lived in Budejovice. All of them ended up in the gas chambers.

I am the only Freund male left, but you, Carole, and your sisters are related to the Merkel boys in New York, and the Landa girls in Toronto. My cousin Willie (Aunt Marianne's older brother) was married to Sylva, and they had one daughter, Monika. Sylva and Monika live in Prague.

PART II

SCHOOL DAYS

Now, I got somewhat ahead of my own story, because I wanted you to know a bit about our family, and their background.

My school-days started in Grade I, in a four-storey, old building, just a couple of blocks away from our home. If I looked from my window, across the blacksmith's yard, I could see the red brick school. It smelled of urine, from the not well-kept bathrooms. We had narrow wooden benches. Three boys sat on each bench, with a row of desk tops.

My first day was long and frightening. The teacher was a nice lady, who taught me in grades one and two. Her husband taught me later, in grades three and four. The principal came in on the first day. He was grey-haired, tall, and looked like somebody's old grandfather.

This was a boy's school; no girls; all schools were divided. The boys, mainly from poor families, were full of pranks. I was the only Jewish boy in the class. I made a good friend of Zdenek Švec, whose father was a superintendent at another nearby school. We spent a lot of time together. We loved walking at night through the dark corridor's of Zdenek's school. Rope-driven elevators - just platforms - were prohibited to us, but sometimes we got brave, and rode them between the floors.

Zdenek's parents were decent, hard-working, simple people. They lived in the school, and their living room and kitchen

combined were always warm and smelled of baking. Zdenek and I played cards.

[In my childhood, I was not very much aware that because I was Jewish, I was different from others. I was not brought up that way. My family observed the Jewish holidays - I remember our Passover Seders, where we all sat around our round dining-room table, and Father read Hebrew prayers from a black book. On Chanukah, we lit candles, and sang "Mooz Tzur", and then we received presents. There was a special family warmth in these celebrations.]

X
MUSIC
Helen.

Both of my parents came from homes which were part of the general community, far away from the ghettos of earlier days, as both grandfathers were public servants.

Grandfather Alexander Freund, the Judge, saw to it that his children attended religious school, but he did not conduct much of outward observance. However, when he was asked to become baptised to improve his career, he refused to give up his Jewish religion, which he did not appear to practise. He died in 1927, and this request for his baptism was long before the Nazis appeared on the scene.

Even though they were not persecuted, they knew they were different, and the past experiences of oppression were not too distant. When Aunt Anda Jung, my mother's sister, married a Christian, in Innsbruck, that saddened my grandparents, but, of course, they did not attempt to interfere. Aunt Anda was baptised in order to marry her beloved Robert, who was a Catholic, but her parents never learned of this.

Some of my friends were Jewish, but most were not. This was, of course, before the Nazi invasion and the terrible

hatred which was stirred up.

In my early school years, from 1936 to 1939, we felt strongly Czech. Once, the President of the Republic, Mr. Beneš[✓], visited Budejovice[✓], and all the children lined up along the streets, waving the red, white and blue flags of the country. We sang "Where Is My Land?" - the Czech national anthem.

Our great hero was Thomas G. Masaryk, the founder of the Czechoslovakian republic in 1918. He was a tall, slim man, with a white beard. Pictures of him riding a horse were in our textbooks, and hanging on the school walls.

Masaryk was a great Czech nationalist, who believed, first of all, in Truth. His motto was PRAVDA ZVITEZI - TRUTH WILL PREVAIL. While he was a professor at a University, he defended a Jewish peasant, who was accused of murdering a Christian child, because the superstitious believed that blood was needed to bake matzoh for Passover. Masaryk was a believing Christian, and he stood up against injustice. He successfully defended the Jew (whose name was Hilsner), by proving to the Judge and the country that the old superstition was a lie.

Masaryk was the son of a poor coachman. When he grew up he became a famous professor. He loved learning and justice.

He was then the president of Czechoslovakia from 1918 (after the collapse of the Austrian Empire, when the First World War was over, to 1935).

TGM - as Masaryk was known - had a favourite song, "Ach Synku" which translates like this:

"Hey, Sonny, did you work today? Did you plough the field?"

"No, I did not, Papa, my plough has broken down".

"If it has broken down, then repair it, Sonny;
learn to be self-reliant".

So it was during the idealistic days when my parents married, and my brother and I were born. The idea of a democratic republic, with a wise and just president was beautiful. Unfortunately, there were economic problems in Czechoslovakia, as there were in the entire world. There was unemployment, there were poor people. Czechoslovakia was a small country, situated next to an aggressive and powerful Germany.

From Grade I on, twice a week, I attended religious classes. Rabbi Ferda came to our school, and all the Jewish children were taught together for the two one-hour sessions, each week. Rabbi Ferda taught us from a book called "Sinai". It had all the old stories, and pictures, from the distant land called Palestine. Rabbi Ferda was happy with Czechoslovakia, and Thomas G. Masaryk, but he did not believe that it would last.

When Masaryk died in 1937, we all wept. The world wept. When, two years later, Hitler's armies and Hitler's great, overwhelming and overpowering hate of the Jews was brought into Czechoslovakia, Rabbi Ferda could have said, "I told you so".

As with many families like ours, we had household help. Usually, a girl from a small village, where the future for her was dim, would take a position with a town family. I remember only two, Maria and Karla.

Maria was tall and slim, and very nice. She got mixed up

with a soldier, and had a baby. But after the baby was sent to Maria's parents, she came back to us. Karla had a big bosom, and I remember that she often had her breasts uncovered. Maybe that's why she did not stay long.

Of all the seasons, I loved spring the best. I watched the thick ice on our kitchen window, as it melted slowly, and the pretty ice designs would disappear. Then we opened the windows wide, and there was such wonderful air coming in. Large trees in the private garden under our windows, produced blossoms of heavenly aroma. Then, my mother and I went out to buy a pair of new shoes for me, and instead of the long stockings which I wore all winter, I got short socks. I felt like a bird who had just learned to fly.

Walking was an interesting pastime. On the bank of the Malse River, there was an old man - he was always there - making rope with a spinning wheel. I watched him for hours. Further along the river, there was an ice cutter. Large blocks of ice were cut from the frozen river, and lifted with a small crane into a truck.

Beyond the bank of the river, was a high stone wall. Towering above the wall stood an old black tower, which contained the "torture doll". Although I never saw the doll, the story known to all is that during the Middle Ages, prisoners were thrown inside the larger than life-sized figure. It had nails on the inside, and the metal floor was said to have been heated to red hot. No one came out alive.

Every child growing up in Budejovice[✓] knew about the torture doll. It made little difference that it had not been used since the Middle Ages. Who knew, then, at that time, that it might be used again?

In my first grade at school, I was chosen to recite a poem from a stage in the school gymnasium. I borrowed a black suit, with long pants, and a top hat, for this special performance. Even then, as I still do today, I hated facing any type of public. My parents were proud, however, as the evening went off quite well.

Money was never discussed in our family. I suppose that my father earned well, as a doctor, but I always picture him as struggling to help others. He saved the lives of many children. Whenever summoned, even late at night, he would get up and make a call. Once, at an out-of-town call in the middle of the night, he was stopped, robbed and hit over his head. It was not too serious, and so he made it back home on his own. After that, my mother went with him on night calls.

One day, while going shopping with Mother, we found a 10-Crown bill - worth about \$10. Mother was so thrilled that she took us all to the best pastry shop in town, for chocolate eclairs and "Indians".

Our apartment was large; it had its own little staircase leading to it from the main staircase. My brother and I slept and played in the children's room.

One Sunday, when I must have been about eight, we were joined on our outing by an old friend of my father's. His name was Dr. Hugo Adler. As students, they had gone to school together. This friend and his wife brought along two kids:

A boy, slightly younger than I, and a girl of four. The girl was a nuisance, always getting lost in the woods, or chasing squirrels.

But the boy - a good-looking one, with short hair - proved a big challenge. He had so many interesting things to talk about, and dreams of the future. By the time our walk was over, I was fascinated by him, and we arranged to meet soon again. So began my friendship with Fricek - Fritz Adler. We went tobogganing and skating. He dared to try everything. One day, while our apartment building was being increased by one floor, and there was scaffolding on the outer walls, my friend, Fricek, decided to climb up. Soon, his fingers got stuck in some metal parts, and there he hung and screamed. He was rushed to hospital, but the damage was not so great, after all.

Fricek and his family lived in a large room, with only a small kitchen. I was with him frequently, and I was envious of his courage, and his constant flow of ideas. From a fireman to a pilot - those were his ideas. His little sister, Hana, meantime, became obsessed with the desire to own a pony. She fought so hard, that her kind father gave in, and bought her one. She then forgot people, and lived only for the cute horsie.

When Fricek got sick, and I could not visit for a week, I felt like an orphan.

After a year's stay in Budejovice, the Adlers moved on to distant, mysterious and dark Norway - a land where the night lasts half a year; and the day, the other half.

My only memento of Fricsek was his signature on a piece of paper. I looked at it frequently, and wondered where he was. We met again after the war. I shall write about the Adlers again, later.

One of my most favourite pastimes was riding or just watching trains. Budejovice[✓] was an important link between Austria and Prague, and many trains passed through. I stood for hours on top of a bridge, under which trains were coming into, or leaving, the station. Every train - fast, slow, freight - was a thrill. Even more, I loved going by train. When we visited all of our grandparents in Prague, we took the Express, which rushed on rails, over rivers, and in valleys, through tunnels and towns. For the whole trip, three solid hours, I did not move away from the window.

One such trip to Prague was a sad one.

My mother suffered from stomach problems. Lots of tests and different doctors, and finally, she went to Prague to be operated on, in a good, private hospital. They took out part of her stomach.

When we were in Prague, during the operation, I stayed with my father's brother, Ernst. His apartment was nice - it was on a high floor. At night, I looked out of the windows at the neon lights of the big city. Ernst and his wife, Mitzi, had a daughter, Eva - rather a pushy, but still, nice girl. Uncle Ernst was a newspaper publisher, but when the Germans came, he was kicked out of his job. Bitter and upset at that, he applied for papers to go to America, and soon after my visit, they actually left for New York. How smart were they to have the foresight to leave the rotting Europe!

One day, I think in the fall, my brother and I went for a walk along a narrow river. We were quite a distance from home. The bright sky slowly darkened; it threatened for a long time, but then a heavy downpour and thunder came in, without relief. For an unknown reason - and that I still remember - I felt uneasiness and premonition. We ran home, becoming wet right through. The mood at home was thick with tension. My parents listened to the radio, and that evening, several friends came over, and the talk was serious. Words like war - Hitler - Jew - Benes - came through frequently in the conversation.

The innocence of my childhood came to an end.]

PART III

THE WAR STARTS, AND DEPARTURE

I was nine years old - in 1939 - when the German army rolled over from the Austrian borders to our town. It was a grim day - armoured trucks, tanks, soldiers in dark green uniforms; and an occasional airplane, flying low. Only a year before, we were lining the streets, as school children, waving our Czech flags, when President Beneš[✓] visited Budejovice[✓]. Now, there were no flags, and President Beneš[✓] had flown to England before the Germans came in. With the Germans came the dreadful Nazi ideology, led by their leader, Adolf Hitler[✓], perhaps the greatest criminal political leader of all time.

Most people stayed indoors when the Germans came, but there were some who welcomed them. These people hated the Jews, were envious of those had more than they, and now it was their turn to show their meanness.

Nobody knew what would happen. War had not yet started, because the Czech army was issued orders not to resist the invaders. The Germans took over quickly - some people were arrested the first day. Soon, orders appeared on bulletin boards, and in newspapers.

We Jews were hit the hardest. "Jews not permitted" signs appeared in cinemas, the coffee houses, street cars, public buildings, etc. Schools were ordered not to allow us in; public swimming areas were prohibited to us. Once, I walked near my home - all alone in the street - and I noticed my Grade 3 teacher across the street. He crossed towards me,

and as we passed, he shook my hand quickly, and said, "Be brave." He took a great risk: To the Germans, even talking to a Jew by a non-Jew was a crime.

Discussion among adults at home - with parents' friends - was often in German, perhaps so that we children could not follow it. At night, we listened to the news from England on short wave radio, as the Czech radio was in the hands of the Germans. There were pessimists, and there were optimists. The pessimists thought, 1 - 2 years, and all would be back to normal; the optimists talked of weeks. Well, it took six years, and for us, at least, things never came back to normal.]

My friendship with Zdenek and other non-Jewish boys came to an end, but now I discovered other people. There were about three hundred Jewish families in town, and except for an occasional visit to the local Synagogue, I did not know many of them. Some of these people were professionals - like us; I mean, doctors, lawyers; others were small storekeepers, and several wealthy manufacturers.

I joined a group of four boys - all my age - and we became good friends. There were two Rudis, one Henry, one Paul, and I. One of the Rudis was rich, and the other, poor; Henry was also rich; and Paul was poor, and also, smaller than the others. Now, however, as the Germans took everything from us, we were all poor.

By then, we were required to wear a yellow Star of David on each outer garment, over the lapel. Our parents warned us to stay away from certain parts of the town, where it was known there were hooligans and Nazis. I do not think that we were

subjected to much abuse, at that time.

School now became a private affair, in the living room. Groups of kids met, and were instructed by young Jewish teachers. Occasionally, a father of some of our friends would be arrested, and he would disappear. We had to give away our car, and father closed down his medical office.

There was another Jewish family in the house; simple, poor people. They lived next to the butcher's store. Their place was warm, and smelled of meat. I don't remember their names, but their daughter, Anna, and I, became friends, and I often visited their warm apartment, next to the store. We sat around, talked, and played cards.

As time went on, we were ordered to give up half of our apartment. We lost two out of four rooms to some insurance office. Our maid, Maria, had to leave us - but she often came for a visit.

Some friends tried and succeeded in leaving the country - they went to Palestine, England, Canada, or the United States. It became more and more difficult to get permission to leave. My father was among the optimists, and thought that all would return to normal, soon. He and his friends liked to joke about Hitler, and the Nazis. Unfortunately, the whole thing was far from a joke.

Among more pleasant memories from this time - 1940 and 1941 - were the summer days spent out of town, along the River Moldau. As we were banned from public swimming, we were allowed to use only a narrow strip of land along the road for swimming; about a half-hour walk out of town, or a ten-minute ride by bicycle.

There we were permitted to set up benches, and changing rooms; we had space for four ping pong tables, and when everything was cleared, even for a small soccer field. I became one of the best ping pong players, and won the first prize in a tournament. The water in the river was filthy - pieces of raw sewage, floating on the surface, were not uncommon - yet we would cool off, and have fun. Great feelings of warmth were established among the young people. We even produced a magazine. It was hand-written, and called "Gossip" ("Klepy", in Czech); and a picture of me kicking a ball, appeared once, on the front page.

(At that time, we - the Jews of Budejovice[✓] - started to take some interest in religion again. The beautiful, tall Synagogue, with two steeples and many beautiful entrances, was located in a fine part of the city. It was built in the late 1800's. The Germans could not stand competition from another God, so they took the building down. It was completely wiped out.

Services were now held in a large, decorated warehouse. Our Rabbi Rudolf Ferda - who had all gold teeth - instilled and inspired participation of the children, and soon, Friday night services were full of girls and boys. A chorus of 10- to 12-year-old girls and boys was organized, and their beautiful voices made many at the services tremble with joy. We boys of ten and eleven learned to pray, and partly in fun, and partly seriously, imitated our Cantor, and held services at home. Rabbi Ferda was a good man. His long sermons always included his theme that Jewish history winds itself like a

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red thread through the ages. He spoke in Czech, with a German accent, and sometimes, we could not keep from bursting out into a laugh. When he ordered us out, we were really sorry.

A special relationship now developed among the young Jews, who were shunned by the general community, and villified in newspapers and on radio. We now found new strength, and helped each other.

When a very poor family came to town with many children, room was quickly found for helping them. We took in a little girl, who lived with us for a while.

My father, no longer permitted to practise medicine, spent the summer days in working in a garden, which belonged to friends. He loved it.

What would happen when our savings were gone, and nothing would be left to live on, was a big question mark. We had to get used to eating less and cheaper food - bread without butter, and potatoes, and only rarely, meat.

DEPARTURE

České Budějovice was my home town; my home. It was there that my Grandfather Alexander sat in his office overlooking the large square, and administering justice, as a county judge. A stone's throw away from the Black Tower, my father had his doctor's office, where mothers brought their sick children to be helped, and often, their lives saved. Throughout the town, a few grocery or linen shops were owned by our Jewish friends, and they had taken them over from their fathers or grandfathers. Some friends owned factories, others were workers in them. There was a scrap iron yard owned by a Jewish family, and there were several teachers and doctors, who were also Jewish. These families had lived in the town for many generations, and no one considered that they did not belong.

On April 22, 1942, the town population went down by 1,000 people. The night before, all those previously notified were told to appear, with their luggage, at a large warehouse near the railway station. The Jews of Budějovice were a civilized lot - they did not fuss much - and having always been used to doing what they were told, they checked into the warehouse, presented their documents, were assigned numbers, and they prepared for the night. A few children whimpered, and the older boys even started to fool around.

Next day, we packed our night things, and were told to board a passenger train, which would take us to a gathering place. The major worry was whether the place would be in Czechoslovakia, or outside. Somehow, there seemed to be less worry, as long as we stayed in our own country.

As the train moved, we got our first glimpses of the cruel SS*men in their perfectly-ironed uniforms, and with their animal-like expressions. One such beast - a high official with many stars on his uniform - inspected the train. Shouting orders in German, he kicked and slapped several people who came in his way.

The train sped north towards Prague, then west, and at the end of the day, we unloaded in the gathering-place, with the name, Terezin (Theresienstadt, in German). It was an old town, with many soldiers' barracks, massive three-storey brick buildings, and several large yards. The town had a moat all around it, to make escape impossible.

The first night in Terezin, we slept again in a large warehouse, body next to body, with just enough room to tiptoe. Next day, the families were separated. Women were moved out to one of the large barracks, and men, to another. There was not much time for saying goodbye, as we had to line up quickly. Food was distributed from large barrels, into small pots which were assigned to everyone in Terezin. Bread, potatoes and gravy comprised the major, daily meal.

Here, in Terezin, we stayed from April, 1942, to November, 1943.] The town was getting more and more crowded, by incoming transports of Jews from other parts of Czechoslovakia. Old people and sick people started dying quickly. Every morning, bodies covered with white sheets were seen piled up in wagons, and then moved to the crematorium.

(At first, we all lived in the barracks, many to a room, sleeping on the floor. Later on, all the regular population of Terezin moved out, and we moved into homes, schools, halls,

*SS - Schutz Staffel - the Nazi elite troupes, the guards of the concentration camps.

etc. Somehow, amid all this, the children were allowed a little fun - to play in the yard, or sing and play word games. One of my memories is of a typical country teacher who sang with us. His - and my - favourite song, was "Spring will come again, May is not far away".]

Terezin was a town of brick, stone, paved streets - hardly a tree or flowers. One day, a group of children - I was one of them - was permitted to go out of town to play on a small patch of grass. It was early summer. Bees were buzzing, and ^{we} dandelions were in bloom. How wonderful life now appeared! Sadness and great hope for the future of freedom brought me to tears. Others felt the same way. Some of the children wrote moving poetry after the day's excursion.

Much poetry was written by the children of Terezin, and some of it survived, to be published in a book-form, after the war.

Within several months of our arrival at this strange town built for soldiers, but now full of prisoners, I moved into an address, L 417. All the streets going north and south were designated "L". and all those going west and east were designated "Q". So L 417 meant house number 17, in the fourth north-south street.

It was not an ordinary house, but a small-town, 2-storey school, with wide halls and large rooms. I was assigned to Room 9, on the second floor, one of about ten such rooms.

In the room, there were several double bunks, three levels high; and also several single bunks, also three levels high. That provided sleeping space for 40 boys. In the middle of the room, there were only a couple of benches, and a single, long table.

All the boys in Room 9 were 13 and 14 years old. In charge was a tall, handsome man, in his early 20's. He was strict, sharp and fair. His name was Arno Erlich. Just as all the others, he was Jewish - but not observant. We all loved him, and obeyed his commands. Arno was a Boy Scout leader before coming to Terezin and so he was chosen to become our room leader.

Some of the other room leaders were teachers or social workers. Most had progressive ideas; some were socialists; some, Zionists; and some, Czech nationalists who hoped for restoration after the war, of a Masaryk-type republic for Czechoslovakia.

(To make life meaningful, we were given talks by teachers (this was not really allowed, but no one bothered much to enforce this rule), we played games, had our chores, and were under strict discipline.

There were only two washrooms in the hall for several hundred boys, so that we each took turns to stand on duty - both day and night - to keep order and to watch over possible flooding and overflowing.

We played chess, Sprtec, 20 Questions, and at times, we put on plays. We published a newsmagazine - once a week. It was written by Stern, the boy with the best handwriting. Stories, poems, jokes and drawings were in the magazine. I, too, wrote for the magazine; several poems were published.)

At certain times, we were allowed to go out of the school, to walk around, or to visit our parents. Mother was often sick. Father was the doctor at the L 417 School, and I saw him often. My brother, Karel, was in another room at the school.

In our Room 9, we formed intense friendships, we discussed everything, and even held ping pong championships. I was one of the best in our room, and represented Room 9 in competition with the other rooms. So life went on. We were hungry, and at times, sick, but did not complain.

Around us, we saw the suffering of the helpless, old people, who were often left lying on the ground in dirt, waiting for death. Anybody attempting to run away from Terezin, when caught, was executed by hanging in the square. German soldiers were all around, and demanded absolute discipline.

One day, I believe it was November 17th, 1943, everybody in Terezin was awakened early, told to get ready, and to march on the street. Quickly organized, we lined up, formed a column, and followed others. We were led - perhaps 40,000 - out of the gates to a large valley, where we stood in formation to be counted. Towards the afternoon, rumours started to spread: That we would all be machine-gunned, or bombs would be dropped on us.

Panic started to spread when darkness fell. No one knew what would happen, but we still stood in long columns, each, 5 deep. Finally, late at night, the gates of the Ghetto reopened, and the dash back began. By now, everyone was rushing and running, as the columns broke up. Many were trampled underfoot, and I don't know how many died. All those boys in Room 9 made it back safely, and fell asleep quickly, that horrible night.]

The Czech Jews were a talented bunch. There were many famous actors, singers, painters, acrobats, etc., in Terezin, and when possible, they performed. There was theatre in the attics of old houses, there were evenings of singing in sheds and barns, and in the small gymnasium in our School L 417, they played Smetana's popular opera, "The Bartered Bride". The conductor sat at the piano, and accompanied singers and choruses in the happy music. I must have heard it 20 times - just standing up, or sitting on the floor, as there were no seats.

I even had my bar-mitzvah in Terezin. Rabbi Ferda, the man with the gold teeth from Budejovice, taught me my portion. He was a bit of an actor, but sincere. He believed that the reason why the Jewish people were so punished, was because they left their God. I wondered about that theory. *Ausch*

My bar-mitzvah took place on June 13, 1943, in the attic of the Dresden Barrack. (Each barrack was named after a German city). I memorized the whole thing, and Rabbi Ferda was very pleased. From my parents, I got a fountain pen and a beautiful, small pocket watch, which I treasured until I had to give these up in Auschwitz. >

The year and a half which I spent in Room 9, were very exciting, and thanks to our leader, Arno, even inspiring. We learned self-reliance. Achievement badges were given for certain tasks. To go without talking for one full day, I found impossible. I tried, anyway. It was one day that I met my parents in the evening. I was excited, and as soon as I rushed to them, I blurted out that I was not to talk that day. Well - that was the end of that experiment!

We had some older professors visit to talk to us about

history, philosophy, and maths. Some of the boys were really brilliant. I merely hopped along. In an English lesson, I was named Johnny - and that name stuck with me. No one ever called me anything else, after that.

Some days, we were allowed to go out of the school to explore the town. We walked through the backyards of the old houses, seeing everywhere people crowded on floors. The big barracks which were built two hundred years ago, had catacombs - narrow tunnels, dug in the ground. We dared - although warned not to - to walk, stooped down deep inside the tunnels. On the way back, we walked past the infirmary, where mental patients were kept. The sight was awful: Men and women, lying all around, some screaming, others fighting, and calling for help - and there was little help around.

One day, by special permission, some boys in our room were allowed to join a work force in tending gardens on the outskirts of Terezin. We were assigned shovels and marched into the country. How wonderful it was to see green fields and hills. We worked until noon, and then were allowed to use a shower - a real shower, what a treat! Usually, we just washed in a small basin.

We sang songs - "And to resist all the Hamans, we shall break down the gates that keep us in. Soon the day is coming when life will begin again. We shall pack up to go home again, and laugh at the ruins of the Ghetto".

We staged battles between the Philistines and the Israelites, with a chorus reciting the story. We re-enacted the David and Goliath fight. We sang Czech patriotic songs, and hoped for a happy future.

And it was not to come.] Reports from outside the Ghetto talked of terrible war raging in France, and England; of German forces going deep into Poland and Russia. We heard of Germans losing millions of soldiers in the ice and snow near Moscow. Their victories started to turn into defeats.

More Jews were brought to Terezin - from Germany, from Holland. Sanitation was getting worse; food rations, lower. In the summer, it was unbearably hot; in the winter, we froze. All this was bearable - but the worst were now the transports from Terezin, east to unknown Poland.

Two to three thousand people at a time were given notice to prepare their belongings, and move to an old warehouse for a trip the next day. Only 2 days' warning was given. Fear started to spread - who will be in the next transport? Each transport took 2 or 3 boys from our room. Afterwards, it was very quiet, and we each wondered when our number would come up.

So, one gloomy day, in November, 1943, I was handed a little slip. No one knew who made the selections, but here it was. Soon, my mother came in to help me pack. She was - or pretended to be - cheerful. Her favourite Czech song was, "As long as we have our song, we are alive and happy".

Next day, we - my parents, Karel and I - checked in, with two thousand other people, into a large warehouse. Only dim lights broke up the complete darkness. I noticed a pretty girl in a yellow sweater in the bunk bed across from me. She looked at me, too. That night, no one slept much. Anticipation and fear filled the air.

So started the journey into the worst part of my life.

PART IV

AUSCHWITZ AND BIRKENAU

Auschwitz is a town in southwestern Poland, not far from the Czechoslovakian borders. To get there by train from Terezin, one passes Prague, continues east towards Moravska Ostrava, and then, turning north, enters Poland.)

This is an area of coal mines, steel mills, large factories and poverty. Hundreds of thousands of workers were needed to work in the arms factories in Auschwitz. What better method than to employ unpaid slave labour? When they would become too weak to work, then they would be shipped out, and replaced by other slaves.

Several miles from Auschwitz, the Nazis built their twentieth century horror invention - death factories. Unheard of previously in the history of civilization, mass murder contraptions were built by the Germans in the 1940's: gas chambers and crematoria. The location was appropriate - an unknown address, vast flatlands, easily reached by a railroad, and no local population to witness the proceedings. The name of the place - Birkenau.

Birkenau was our destination.

The train was a freight cattle train. It had no windows, but narrow slits in the side allowed some air to come in. There was just enough room in our wagon for all to sit or lie down on the floor. We were provided with food for one day, and some old blankets. The trip was slow, and at times, the train stood for hours. No one knew where we were going, and how long it would take. Old people, children, men and women.)

Our family was together, so that we provided some comfort

for each other. We left Terezin early in the morning, while it was still dark. Towards night time, some people began to get sick, and to panic. Arguments could be heard, as tension increased. Father had his black doctor's case, and during the night, administered injections to several sick people.

(It was late at night that we arrived. Doors of the cattle cars were opened from outside. They had been sealed securely, on departure from Terezin.

Uniformed German SS guards were issuing orders: "Quickly, out of the train, and line up in rows of five along the track!" We noticed men in black and white striped uniforms - like pyjamas. These were the prisoners. They told us we were in Auschwitz. Soon, we were herded into big trucks, the doors were shut, and motors started. The little I could see outside provided a strange sight: Long rows of electric lights, and completely flat landscape; high, barbed wire fences in perfectly straight lines; observation posts manned by soldiers, moving floodlights. It seemed like another planet.]

By now, the trucks stopped. In the dark, I noticed that we were all men - the women must have gone in other trucks. Quickly, we were pushed to enter a long barrack; and once inside, again to line up in rows of five. (We were told to put all of our belongings on one pile, and to undress. That was the last I saw of the beautiful watch and the pen which I received from my parents for my bar-mitzvah.)

Standing naked for a long time, we began to shiver. One of the German guards opened wide the doors, letting in cold air from outside. At this moment, the most strange incident



occurred; Two men, perhaps in their twenties, were tossed in through the door. They looked yellow, and were so thin that their bones could be seen. They looked almost wild. Someone threw a piece of soap to them, for which they began to fight, thinking it was food. I had never seen human beings behaving like this. They probably had not had any food for days.

By now, we were moved to the next hall, which had showers in it. Lukewarm water came from the shower heads for perhaps a minute, and then we were moved on again to another long hall. There, there were piles of torn shirts, underwear, socks, shoes, and the prisoner's black and white uniform. We did not have much time to choose our sizes, so that, dressed, we must have looked completely shapeless. The next step was tattooing. We stood in a line, with rolled-up left sleeves, until a man came, and with a quick, sharp object, pricked the skin to tattoo a six digit number on our left arms. Last, our hair, wherever it grew, was sheared off.

It must have been early morning; it was still dark, when we were pushed back into the trucks, and now drive only a short distance, along the high, barbed wire, through a well-guarded gate to the camp - where we were to spend the next six months.

THE FAMILY CAMP

To my big surprise, inside the camp, we found mother and all the other women who came with us from Terezin, and also a group of people who had been transported from Terezin three months earlier. By now, there were probably 4,000 people in the camp. It consisted of two rows of long, wooden barracks; altogether, around 30. There was a road between the two rows. Walking was difficult because of our loose shoes and the deep mud - mud, everywhere. Sometimes, one felt himself sinking into the mud, and had to be pulled up.

(Inside the barrack, there was a long chimney-like oven, along the entire length - perhaps 3 feet high, and 3 feet wide. On both sides of the oven, were 3-layer bunk beds, each for six people - 2 on each level.

There were separate barracks for men and separate barracks for women. Surrounding the camp, on each side, was another camp, each divided from the other by a barbed wire fence charged with electricity. Anyone touching the wire was electrocuted - immediately.

For the most part of the day, we had to stand outside in rows of five, being counted - constantly - by the SS guards. Their faces were cruel, and anyone who moved during the counting, or who made some gesture, was slapped across his face, or kicked. This happened several times a day.]

At noon, they brought in a large barrel, with hot soup, which was ladled out to each inmate into his one possession - a pot with a handle, known as an "eschus". With the soup, there was a chunk of bread. This was all the food until the evening,

when a barrel of warm, thin tea was brought in, to be ladled into the same pot. In the morning, there was again tea, but nothing further. On Sunday, the soup was thicker, and there was tasteless, yellow margarine with the bread.

[Living in dirt with only little water for washing, made fleas a problem. All the doctors in the camp - and Father was among the many - became responsible for inspection of clothing in order to kill the fleas. One rainy day, all the doctors were called out and accused of not doing a good job. They were punished - they had to run in the rain, and do push-ups in the mud.]

My encounter with fleas was dramatic. I had a blue sweater, assigned to me when winter came, which I wore all the time. After a few weeks, my whole body started to itch. I took off my sweater, looked closely, and to my horror, I saw hundreds of small animals crawling and carrying eggs. I could not afford to throw the sweater out, so I shook it, washed it, and used my fingernails to kill most of the beasties.

Another problem I developed was with swollen and painful gums. My whole mouth hurt, and I could hardly open it. This disease was due to lack of vitamins. It made me miserable. I received no treatment; in the spring, the condition improved for a while.

For some time during the day, we were free to walk along the road in the camp. I met some friends who had left Terezin previously. They were the old-timers, and they filled us in on the situation in the camp. That's how we found out that in the camp alongside ours, were Czech gypsies - many of them, children. On the other side, was a camp for men only, and beyond that, one for women only. Ours was the sole camp

where families from Terezin were together. Why did we rate that special privilege?

The most curious question we asked of the old-timers was: What were the two large factories, clearly visible from the camp, perhaps just two kilometers away? Each building had a warehouse, and a very tall, broad chimney. Heavy smoke often poured out of the chimney. Are these bakeries, or perhaps brick factories? The answer was one which shook us, and made us tremble.

Those are gas chambers, we were told, where people from the ghettos are killed, and burned in the ovens. Somehow, we refused to believe it. When, however, several months later, another transport came from Terezin, and was placed inside our family camp, it was our turn to tell the shaken friends the true story of the large chimneys. It was a dramatic truth which, they, too, could not bring themselves to believe.

The winter of 1944 was severe. There was snow, and ice. Many people got sick, and some died. Inside the barrack in which I lived, one dreadful, endless night, a young man coughed himself to death. It took most of the night: His breathing became shorter, and fits of coughing increased. He was vomiting blood. There was no one to help. In the morning, he was sprawled on the floor, finally, dead.

Thanks to some enterprising and idealistically great youth leaders, the authorities permitted part of one of the barracks to be opened to children, up to age 15, where we could play, read, and stay in greater comfort. A few madrichim (youth leaders) organized little groups. We played word games, we exercised a little, we sang, and even played soccer outside.

At night, and during the day, we saw American airplanes flying very high, towards the war front. We knew that the Germans had been beaten at Moscow, and that they had started to retreat. We learned our news as each newly-arrived transport unloaded prisoners.

By that time, our only thought was: Will we last long enough to see the next day? Mother, although not feeling well, cheered us up, and at times, was able to share part of her ration with the rest of us. My brother, Karel, got very sick - typhus - but, miraculously, became healthy again. He was seventeen by then, quite tall, and really, a good boy.

There was only one successful escape from the family camp. This was a miracle, and of course, we found out the full story only very much later.

One of the SS guards drove his official car through the gate of the camp, entering it from the outside. Ten minutes later, the car drove out of the camp with two SS guards. They saluted at the gate, using the Heil Hitler gesture, with the outstretched right arm, and they continued down the road, past several check points, into the countryside.

By the time the missing SS man, the missing prisoner, and the missing car were noted, the two men were on their way to safety. They changed to civilian clothes, abandoned the official car, and disappeared. This happy story did not end there. While the Jewish prisoner found a hiding place, the SS man decided to return to the camp to try to rescue a woman with whom he had fallen in love. This time, the impossible mission did not succeed, and he was caught, and was executed.

The lucky escapee - not the SS guard - survived the war, by hiding in Prague, and then he went to Israel, where he still lives. His name is Mr. Lederer.

After the escape, the discipline was even more tightened, and threats and punishment increased.

[The spring of 1944 arrived. The weather eased a bit, but the mud got deeper. An alert was sounded in March. All those in the camp who came from Terezin in the transport preceeding ours, were to move on. Nobody knew where. Near panic prevailed. By now, all knew that the big factories nearby were gas chambers. There was no longer any doubt.

-In March, all those "old-timers" in the family camp, were taken away in trucks, and never heard from again.

When is our turn? That was the prevailing, tormenting question.

In May, it turned warm. In June, I took off my shirt to sun myself whenever possible. Our children's activities continued, despite fear and hunger. At the edge of the camp, there was a large water reservoir, and for a while, we were allowed to use it for swimming.

[Beginning of July. A major panic. It was now our turn to move on. Would we follow our friends who disappeared in March? No one wanted to admit it, but we all knew. We were handed post cards for sending to Terezin. We were instructed to date them one month ahead. This was ominous. Would we still be alive by then?]

There was a difference!

Rather than all of us being shipped out at one time, we were shipped out in groups: First, all able-bodied men, between 16 and 50.

I said goodbye to Father and Karel, and saw them march away. It was a hot, dry day. I heard later that they went to some labour camp, as workers. How they died, I never knew.

The next day - it was July 6th - exactly one month after my 14th birthday - all boys, aged 14 to 16 were gathered together. In the nude, we lined up in front to the beast - the most feared man around, Dr. Mengele. He was handsome, and dressed in the most elegant uniform. As we passed by him, he motioned with his finger - either to the left, or to the right. Two smaller boys in front of me were sent to the left - I was sent to the right. There were almost 100 boys in the group which I now joined. We were told to gather our belongings, say goodbye, quickly, to others, and form a line at the gate of the camp. I said goodbye to Mother. I think she was pleased that I was together with the stronger boys. She knew what her end was to be. We did not weep. She expressed her lifelong hatred for the Germans, and she sang a Czech song.

That night, those remaining in the family camp were gassed. They were driven away in closed trucks. Many were weeping. As we heard from workers in the gas chambers later, the Czech Jews died singing the Czech anthem, "Kde domov můj" ("Where is my land") and "Hatikvah".

Thus my mother died on July 7th, 1944.

IN THE MAN'S CAMP

This camp was located right next to the family camp. It looked exactly the same. Two rows of barracks, divided by a road running from the gate towards the end. At the gate, there was a small grandstand for a band. Musicians - all prisoners - played in the morning, and in the evening, when the inmates marched off, and returned from working. I could not see the humour of a marching band inside a concentration camp.

The hundred boys who came from the family camp were housed in Block (barrack) No. 13. Little did we know that that was the punishment cell. We were placed there because there was no space in the other barracks. As opposed to the others, this block had a fenced-in yard next to it.

In one corner of the yard stood the gallows. In another, there was a large saw-horse, used for flogging prisoners, who were being punished for some reason. I remembered the torture doll in Budejovice. The Middle Ages were still with us.

We - the boys - were treated nicely by the other prisoners. About half of their men were Jews. A group of Russian officers was also in Barrack 13. These men were tall, and broad, and inspired great respect. In the evening, they hummed, and sang their sad songs. It made us tremble, and even the SS guards were frightened.

Barrack 11, right next to ours, was even stranger. It was inhabited by the "special" commando men, who worked in the gas chambers. They never talked about their work, but everybody

knew it. (At this time - it was the summer of 1944 - the Germans were retreating everywhere. I learned that on June 6, my fourteenth birthday, American and British troops had landed in Europe to beat back and defeat the Germans. This gave us some hope.

(The gas chambers were now going day and night. Heavy smoke covered the entire area. Train tracks were built from the nearby town of Auschwitz, right to the death factories. Trains full of people - mainly Jews - arrived every few hours. The Nazi monster was getting more and more vicious. Tens of thousands were killed daily.)

Our food situation improved. The men of the special commandos in Barrack 11 had all the food they needed, as it came in on the trains which delivered the people to the camp. The commandos were not allowed out of their barrack, but some of us boys managed to sneak inside.

There, we would be fed generously. This, however, did not last long. An order came, forbidding us to go there. The first who disobeyed the order - and was caught - was the smallest of the boys. His name was Pauli. He was severely punished. He was locked up for a night in a box, which was not large enough for him to lie in, or even to sit in. His weeping and sighs grew louder - and then, weaker. He was gasping for air. It seemed like an endless night, as none of us could sleep. But Pauli did survive the night - and from what I hear, even lived to see freedom.

We had duties. The day started at 5:30, summer or winter. When it was light, we were engaged in transporting materials - such as bricks, sand, and snow in the winter, in a large, open

wagon. Instead of it being drawn by a horse, the wagon was pushed by us. About 15 boys were working with one wagon. We were assigned a place to where we were to push the wagon, and we were ordered to stay there.

In the evening, we sat on our beds, or on the chimney in the middle of the barrack, talking or playing word games. At nights, in our bunk beds, we were awakened by large rats, who were hungry, and attacked people.

On Sunday afternoons, we were allowed to play with a ball. On one such occasion, I received the one and only injury of my stay in the camp. One of the boys threw a little stone, from fairly close by, and it landed in the centre of my forehead. A scar survives all these years.

Aside from fear of the gas chambers, hunger, and cold, the worst times were the punishment days. For these, we were only spectators - but what we saw was horrible. The worst such incident was when two men did not return from their work shift. They tried to escape. Sirens sounded, dogs could be heard barking, and we all trembled. After an hour, two bound men were marched into the yard, next to our barrack. We were all standing - as was required for counting, each day, in rows of five, not allowed to move. The two men had blood on their faces. First, they were flogged - one at a time. They were held bent over the saw-horse, and received seventy-five whippings. Two SS men alternated, and used all the animal strength they had. One of the two recovered prisoners was a Jew; the other, not. After the seventy-five lashes, the first man was left lying on the ground. The other, the Jew, was then kicked, beaten with large sticks by the several elite SS

men, until he was unconscious.

We stood there, not being able to think - and no one talked that evening. A doctor, who was one of the prisoners, was called that evening, to bring the poor men to life. Two weeks later, both men were hung on the gallows, and the entire camp had to march by, to watch the spectacle. Due to a request by the barrack commander, a non-Jewish German prisoner, who had intervened, we - the boys - were not required to march by the gallows. We were the only children in the man's camp, called "Mannerlager". Occasionally, someone, somehow, showed a mark of sympathy for us.

[As the days got shorter, and another winter was approaching, there were some new developments. The airplanes flying high above became an everyday event. Some days, it seemed that we could hear at night, distant explosions. The Germans were withdrawing. The smoke in the gas chambers disappeared, after the busy summer. One day - the unbelievable occurred. Work crews began to pick at the two terrible buildings with the large chimneys. In several weeks, the buildings completely disappeared. Of the hundred boys, we were still all alive. Stories of evacuation were rumoured. Moves and changes were always feared, because whatever came next was worse than what had come before.

January of 1945 arrived. Our camp was being evacuated. The final march began.]

PART V

THE FINAL MARCH

(From the 10th of January to the 22nd of April is only 100 days. They seemed like endless ages. There was no sun, only bitter cold, snow and rain. It was a time when hanging on to life, from hour to hour, was a major effort.

While armies from the East advanced towards the heart of Germany, and armies from the West pushed eastward, until the two would meet, the concentration camp prisoners were dragged from camp to camp, from road to road, on foot, by train, day and night. So many could no longer take it. They fell exhausted, and were shot dead.)

Somehow, I just kept marching, not thinking of more than the day when it all would come to an end. At one point, late at night, I fell asleep standing in an open coal train, and my legs collapsed. That would have been the end, but a Yiddish-speaking man helped me up. So I lived another day.

My friend, a little boy whose name I cannot remember, was not so lucky. Hungry and feverish, he began to lose his mind. In delirium, he dreamt, and talked about his one wish, a pot of hot soup. He offered it to all around him, but those near were not sympathetic. In the morning, his frozen blue body was thrown out of the train.

On another occasion, while half-dozing, I heard airplanes above. It was the British. Not knowing what was in the train, they flew along its whole length, machine-gunning it. Bullets were hitting all around me - but I was spared. The

train engineer was hit - and sprawled on the ground, died in a few minutes. Another sortie came, but this time, everybody hid under the train. As soon as the planes disappeared, the SS guards forced us back into the train. A few tried to escape, but were shot in the back.

During this time, I passed by train through my town, Budejovice. I almost saw the house, where once we lived. In a small village nearby, people standing outside tossed apples, rolls, and bread into the train. I arranged to share all with a buddy - and he, with me. He was luckier than I, and managed to catch a few rolls and an apple, which he shared with me. He died later that day.

During those 100 days, I spent time in two camps, Oranienburg, which was in Austria, and Flossenburg, in Bavaria, Germany.)

When we arrived in Oranienburg, we were herded into a large building; it looked like a huge factory. On the floor were several large vats full of water. Thirsty and hungry, we dipped our hands into the liquid - it tasted salty and foul. Some of us got sick.

This camp was already so crowded that there was no place for me. Back into the train! Another long journey. Once again, I passed through Budejovice.

Finally, they found some room for our transport in Flossenburg. This was one of the oldest concentration camps. Located on a hill, and partially dug into a quarry, it was built into the hillside on several levels; with barracks on each level. Right after arrival, there were the inevitable showers. Early in the morning, we were rushed through cold

water, and then we had to run in the nude to another barrack, where camp uniforms were thrown at us. We were told in no uncertain terms that this camp was a tough place to survive in.

The Flossenburg camp was inhabited by several types - German criminals, homosexuals, political prisoners, and now, those of us who had come through Auschwitz. Each type of prisoner was identified by a tag on his lapel.

I found that the political prisoners - usually Socialists - were decent people. The criminals - all Germans - were the worst, and together with the SS men, ran the camp. They were the barrack commanders. One such beast decided that the group of which I was one, deserved a particularly harsh treatment. He called us filthy Hungarian Jews. Within his barrack, which housed perhaps 300 people, we were herded into a narrow passage, so crowded that six had to sleep in one single bed. All we could do was sit up all night, leaning against each other. Those on upper bunks often fell down during the night. This barrack leader constantly threw insults at us, and even withheld from us the already very meagre rations. He always held a rubber hose in his hand, and if any of the "filthy Hungarian Jews" upset him, somehow he let him have it.

It is hard to know why we did not revolt. This horrible man did get what was due him. I learned, that shortly after our liberation, that he received a short trial - not in courts, defended by lawyers - but by his victims. He received the death he deserved - he was hung from a tree.

There was just one incident, while I was in Flossenburg, which I want to relate. One of my fellow prisoners was a

palm reader. I allowed him to tell me about my future. It was good; he said I would survive. That news lifted my spirits considerably.

As the American Army was closing in on Germany, Flossenbourg was suddenly evacuated. Everyone had to leave. In long columns, we set off on yet another march. The most pitiful were the sick - they, too, were chased out of the barracks. Many could hardly walk - these were then machine-gunned in the nearby fields, and quickly buried in the ground.

On the hundredth day, it was pouring, but spring air fought its way through the fog. Trains were no longer running, as all engines had been destroyed by attacks from Allied planes. The sound of guns was always present.

We were now on foot, trudging through fields - and the SS guards still behind us, with their guns pointing. The last night we spent in a barn, sleeping a few hours, and on straw. At this time, there were probably not more than two hundred of us in that group, most of whom were strangers to me.

Early morning, we were awakened to prepare for another day of a death march. So, I kept going, step by step, hour by hour. At about noon, I noticed that our SS guards became quite disturbed.

One of them picked a twig of an evergreen bush, and put it over his head, in an effort to hide under a disguise. These big cowards, who only a few hours ago, were shooting exhausted prisoners, suddenly started running. As we cleared a small forest, and came to the open, a strange sight appeared ahead.

A long column of roaring tanks began to approach us. Fearing first that they were Germans, who were withdrawing, I started running away from them. The tank commanders waved, and so I, and others, stopped running, and we turned towards them. A large silver star on each tank signalled to us that these men were Americans. For the first time, I wept briefly - but there was no time for this. A young man - an American soldier - arrived in a jeep. He spoke Yiddish. Waving his gun, he gathered a group of us, and took us to a small, nearby farm house, and ordered the farmer to feed us, and to put us up.

That night - April 22, 1945 - I slept in a bed. My stomach was upset from the food I ate, and for me, the ordeal was over. ~~Tank battles raged all night.~~

Hitler, the devil who took away peace, and millions of lives, was burning in his bunker in Berlin.)

THE END

EPILOGUE

It was May, 1945; the long-awaited spring had finally arrived. I was not yet 15 years old, back in my native Budeřovice; and, as I had feared, alone. Neither my parents, nor my older brother, survived. Shortly after liberation, a young man and woman whom I met, asked me why I never smiled. "How can I?" was my reply. Now that hunger, and the fear of death receded, the pain and sadness of living through hell and losing all those I loved, was pressing. There was no logic in the punishment to which we had been subjected.

My father's sister, Anna Weiss, her husband, and her daughter, Marianne, who had stayed in Terezin through the war, returned to Prague. I joined them in August, 1945. I enrolled in high school there. The time to rebuild my life had begun.

In the three years in Prague, from 1945 to 1948, I struggled through school, having to catch up on what I had missed during the war. I experienced the exciting life in the large city, with its cultural activities - theatre, movies, and music. On many Saturday afternoons, I stood for two or three hours in the gallery of the Opera House, being charmed and excited by what went on, in the orchestra, and on the stage.

There was not much to eat, but in comparison with the war years, it was paradise. Nor was there any danger to my personal safety. Unfortunately, however, the postwar joy did not last long. Big power conflict between West and East, between Russia and the United States, started to affect our lives. The threat of another war became more ominous and dissension among peoples

started to creep in. Because Czechoslovakia was geographically in the Russian orbit, the will of its people was not what counted. Long discussions of whether communism is better than democracy, or vice versa, were held; no one won in the long run, but Czechoslovakia lost its independence to the Russians.

My best friend, Fricek Adler, his sister, Hana, and their parents, returned to Czechoslovakia. They had survived the war, first by going to Norway, and then to Sweden, always ahead of the German armies. While my father had been an optimist and expected that the bad times would blow over in a few months, his friend, Hugo, was a realist. It was Zdenka, Fricek's mother, who had pushed the family from country to country. She had met her husband, who was a medical doctor - a T.B. specialist - while serving as a nurse in one of the hospitals where he trained. Being from a Czech, Catholic background, she converted to her husband's religion.

Now, the Adlers lived in a mountain T.B. sanatorium, where Fricek's father became a director. I spent my summer and winter vacations with them. Those were happy days We bicycled, we hiked, we talked and laughed a lot. The Adlers' sensitivity to political events was aroused again. For them, the future lay in the newly-created State of Israel. They left to settle there, shortly after its founding.

My friend, Fricek, now named Jaacov, followed in his father's steps; he became a medical doctor, and eventually rose in the army ranks to become the Assistant Surgeon-General of the Israeli Army. But this was many years later. He was the Chief Medical Officer of the Israeli Army, in the Sinai desert in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

The new year of 1948 brought political upheavals to a head. Democracy collapsed, and the Communists took over. When an opportunity came for me to leave the country, and, assisted by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the Canadian Jewish Congress (working with the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services, and other agencies) to settle in Canada, I was ready. All I knew about the country with the strange name was that it was in North America.

A group of 30 - all war orphans under 18 years of age - left Prague by train on March 12, 1948. That day was the funeral of Jan Masaryk, son of the great and beloved Thomas, the first president of Czechoslovakia. Jan, who was foreign minister, either killed himself, or was killed by Russian agents because he wanted to keep his country free.

As I waved back to Prague, to Europe, to the old world, I began to look forward to a new life in Canada. I was almost 18, and there was much to live for.

This is where my story ends.

The questions remained. How come I survived when so many died? The easiest way to answer would be to say that God was with me. I cannot accept this explanation, because it raises more questions than it answers. Why, if God was present in Europe in the 1940's, did He allow the rise of the Nazis, the destruction of cities, the extermination camps, the deaths of millions of Jews and others? More than 40 million people died in camps, battlefields, bombed cities - where was God?

The Budejovice[✓] rabbi, Rabbi Rudolf Ferda, who taught me my bar-mitzvah portion in Terezin, believed that we Jews were punished for leaving our religion and the moral teachings of the Torah. Perhaps there is some truth in this, but would a just God punish so severely and unmercifully?

In practical terms, I would say that 95% of my survival was due to luck: luck to be at the right place at the right time. The remaining 5% was due to my physical stamina, my will to live, and to some of the moral qualities which were taught me by my leaders, such as Arno Erlich, my leader in Terezin. Not the least were my happy childhood and the inspiration of my parents.

Even though I cannot believe that God selected me to live, I am grateful that I survived. Since that wet April day in 1945, when I first sighted the American tanks which liberated me from the Nazis, I have had 34 years of worthwhile life. I learned to smile again.)

POSTSCRIPT

Sometimes memories fade away into a fuzzy distance, but do not disappear. Then they are brought back by some unexpected event many years later.

This is what happened after my cousin Eva Merkel (whose maiden name was Freund, later changed to Forgan) read the account of my childhood and said "How come you don't know how your father and brother Karel died?"

When I came to Prague in the summer of 1945 I happened to meet a fellow prisoner, who said that he knew someone who could tell me about my father. For a brief moment I had a flicker of hope that perhaps he might still be alive; after all he would only be in his forties. The man whom I met told me to come to a certain coffee house in Prague, where the ex-Auschwitz inmates gathered for talk and games of cards. I went there and met again my fellow prisoner. He seemed nervous and told me that he really could not help me; no one really could tell me anything about my father. It was puzzling but I had no choice but to drop the whole matter. Surely, if father was alive, he would contact some of his relatives, like his sister who was now again living in Prague.

This is the episode I had almost forgotten until cousin Eva brought the subject up about 35 years later as we walked on a street in Toronto.

I saw my father and Karel last on a hot day in July 1944. They were walking in a long column, surrounded by S.S. guards, out of the Family Camp at Birkenau. Everyone carried a loaf of bread and whatever small belongings they had. I waved at them through the barbed wire. Karel was thin and pale, having just recovered from a typhoid fever. Father looked a bit better.

The column disappeared in the distance. Later on I also took part in these long marches. Some lasted days with only

short stops for a rest in fields or old barracks.

"Did not anyone tell you how Karel and your father died?" asked Eva.. No one did. My surviving relatives who also were in the camps never discussed the entire subject. It was a taboo, which excited them very much if anyone anywhere would talk about it. Now Eva continued" It was during an evacuation march, I don't know when or where; they had walked for hours. Karel was not well. He could not keep up with the others, and fell further and further behind. Your father was with him. Now they were at the end of the column. Karel fell to the ground completely exhausted. Father tried to help him get up, but now the impatient S.S. Elite Guardsman began to shout. He kicked the boy, and that did not bring Karel to his feet. The S.S. man fired two shots-- one for Karel and one for your father. That's how they died."

This event told to me in 1980 gave me a new appreciation of father-- he died as a doctor with his patient and as a parent with his son.

MY LIFE 1945-1948

Part One.

Return to Budejovice.

Now that I am sixty years old, I look back on some memories, which I would like to preserve for my family. My father was writing a diary and how I wish it had been preserved so I could feel closer to him.

In my book of wartime memories I covered the worst part of my life; so from now on there is much cheer and happiness. I was not yet fifteen when, somewhere in the wet forest of blood soaked Germany, my ordeal came to end. I was alive!

I spent a few days resting and regaining strength in an old farmhouse where I was placed by a Yiddish speaking G.I. Under orders the German family had to look after me and a few other former camp inmates. My first meals went through me like a sieve. Then the time came to start a return. Yes, I wanted to go home.

To me that meant the old town in south Bohemia known by the name of Ceske Budejovice. Perhaps, but with a tiny hope, someone of my family was also recuperating now and heading home. The journey started on the front bumper of a jeep driven madly by a black American soldier. I held on for dear life. We soon came to a village and there a group of about forty men were placed into a large military truck to be driven to the Czechoslovak border. How could the driver know that he should have gone east? So we drove west and in about two hours arrived at the city of Nuremberg. This is where the great parades had been held by the mad crowds of Nazis only a few years earlier and where the virtues of hate and war had been glorified. Now it was a sight to behold. Long blocks of destroyed buildings, some still smoking from fire, covered the entire city. This was the end of the war that Germany had wanted and foisted on the world.

Two days later, we arrived at the border. Now, we saw the red, white and blue flags and the smiling faces of people in the street. The beginning of May is always cheerful here, but the year 1945 was different: A new era was to be born.

Only a few of our group were heading for my home town. There was no transportation. Trains were not running and buses had no fuel. Three of us were given a ride in the back of a panel truck. Western Bohemia is picturesque. There are hills and valleys and poor roads. So as our vehicle, puffing like an old woman, came almost to a crest of a hill the gears failed and so did the brakes. I saw the driver jumping out and the rest of

us stuck in the van began our journey down the hill. I thought, this was almost funny: that my life would come to end in this manner. But it did not and we landed in a shallow ditch on our side. So the three of us started to walk and we walked for hours. Finally, we arrived at a tiny railway station and begged a ride to Budejovice. After a while an old steam engine appeared with an engineer and a coal stoker and they offered us a ride in the tiny locomotive. As a child I always admired steam trains, and now I was in one, going home. There was nowhere to sit, so we stood all the way. An older man named Polevka was a fellow traveller with me and he never stopped talking. (The only person I ever knew -- I met him once in the town a few weeks later-- who said it was better in the camp, because he did not have to fight with his wife.)

When we finally arrived at the town, my face was black from coal and my clothes torn. Thus I arrived in Budejovice. It was early evening, and unnoticed, I walked through the town to my old address, Jirovcova 11, a short block, where I used to play in the park with my mother watching me.

I knocked on the door at the Kocers. They owned the three storey apartment building, with a butcher shop on the main floor. A young woman opened the door-- yes she recognized me. She was the wife of one of the Kocer's sons. She asked me in and said I could stay and look for my family the next day. First I had to have a bath. A real bath, in a tub! My first one in three years! Then, Vera fed me and she and Vojtech, the husband, made a bed for me in their own bedroom on a couch in the corner.

Our beautiful apartment was empty. The German widow and her mother had just departed or perhaps were deported. I did not pity them. After all, they came in with the Nazis and now were allowed to go back to Germany. We, the Jews, were treated differently when they came. We were first put into camps and then murdered. I waited for someone of my family to return. No one did. I was really not surprised. Only a handful of our people returned out of a full thousand. One who did was my mother's cousin Karel Ofner. His wife Pavla was not Jewish, so he was treated a bit better than others. The Ofners lived in a gloomy, dusty apartment with a washroom at the end of an unlighted hall. These kind people took me in. There was not much to eat. Pavla made a thick soup every day and we ate bread and potatoes with it.

Alone I wandered through the streets of Budejovice, known also by its German name "Budweiss." It is located 120km south of Prague, where the river Malse flows into the river Vltava. My grandfather was a judge there before the First World War and my father was a children's doctor before the Second World War. This old town of about 50.000 people was founded in the middle ages by Count Budejov. He built thick defence walls and towers in the inner town. In the 19th century they began to brew beer there and some one exported the name of the beer to America. Thus the Budweiser Beer.

The smell of the town remained. The old Black Tower, built centuries ago at edge of a large square, was blacker from soot. A few people stopped me in the street and said : " I remember your father. He saved the life of our child." The signs on Cinemas, at the entrances of parks and the municipal pools, saying "Jews not allowed " had been removed, but there were no Jews left in town. Uncle Karel thought of my future and so did I. I bought a beginner's Latin text book, and Uncle and I visited the High School to enrol me for next season. The halls of the school were dark, and the principal, always wearing an overlarge hat, was unpleasant. He said that he could not enrol me because the law banning Jewish students from schools were never cancelled. Did he not know that the war was over and that the Nazis had lost? Too stunned, we said nothing and walked out.

The summer came and with it my walks with my old friend Zdenek, who always remained faithful. His father was a janitor at the nearby school and we knew each other since early childhood. We went to the swimming pool and helped in a fruit shop across from my old home. I walked alone to the area "U Vorisku " where, along the Vltava river, the Jewish youth had been allotted a strip of land for recreation, games and swimming. Four years ago, this was full of happy noise and life; now not a sound. My emotions wavered between utter defeat and a feeling of victory over Hitler. But I was happy to be alive.

In August I went to a small village named Dubno for a month of recovery. It was a month full of sunshine. The family owning the local grocery store took me in as a companion to their 11 year old son, Jena. He had three older sisters who had their own lives. We went swimming in a water hole nearby and took bicycle rides to the nearby town of Hluboka. I had my first "date" then, which was a complete disaster. Jena arranged it with the prettiest 15 year old village girl. We met in the dark in the village square. We stood there, next to each other, she looking one way and I looking another. I was too terrified to utter a sound and she did not help. After a few minutes, which appeared to last for ever, we walked away. Next day, Jena and his eleven year old friends wanted to know whether we did it, they meant kissed. I learned that the village kids knew more of that type of life than most, and that I was far from ready for a girl.

At the end I thanked my hosts, whose name I have forgotten, and returned to Budejovice. Karel Ofner had good news for me. My Aunt Annie, sister of my father, returned from Terezin, where she and her husband were allowed to remain till the end. They were living in Prague and were willing to give me a home. Uncle Max had been a very well known professor at a Business Academy and later a Bank Director, but now his health had been broken and he died shortly after my coming to Prague.

I moved to the fine district of Vinohrady, into a large apartment building to live with my strict aunt and two girls in their early twenties, both camp survivors .

Part Two

Life in Prague

Visiting Prague from Budejovice before the war with my parents was one of the excitements that I always enjoyed the most. To live in this big beautiful city would have been a treat under normal conditions. For me, however, it was not all joy. I did admire the wide boulevards, with imposing old buildings, the many parks and theatres, the sights of the meandering Vltava, towered over by the castle Hradcany, the graceful bridges and the concert halls, where I spent many hours of pleasure. The sadness was for losing my family and having lived through such inhuman days for reasons which we will never understand.

I was fifteen years old and schooling became my most important concern. I was enroled in a Gymnasium (a high school) not very far from my new home. Having not been to any school since I left Budejovice in 1942, I found school very difficult. In particular I feared Latin, physics and math. I was placed in the first grade of the school, which would be equivalent to grade 9 in Canadian schools. Our teachers, called professors, were paranoid primadonnas, whose daily joys were to humiliate their students, for whom they felt real hatred. To be called to the blackboard, unprepared, was like a punishment. Your mark would be based on such an occurrence and you may not have been given another chance. Of course our professors did have their favourites, but I was not among them. Nevertheless I worked as much as I was capable of and eventually my marks began to improve. Classes were from 8am till 2pm and on Saturdays, we got off at twelve. Making friends was also difficult for me. My aunt was strict with me and did not want me to look for friends, with whom I had spent the years in the camp. It was her attitude that the only way I could live a normal life would be to forget all that happened in the past and become a "Czech boy". Well, my attachment to Czech history, literature and particularly music was very strong and I never really spoke another language till then. It was not in me to drop my Jewish past although my religious commitments were few.

Every Saturday, for dinner, served at noon (just after the 12 o'clock news, which we all listened to in great anxiety) Aunt served meat and potatoes. The guests were always son V. and his wife S. I liked those meals. Conversation was on high level. V. was a bright lawyer working for an oil import business and S. an actress, who knew the great Karel Capek personally. Her father had been a member of the prewar Parliament. They could dazzle me with erudite talk, on business and more important to me, on theatre and music. They were the type of people who had contacts for opera tickets and they associated with better "class", I thought. They were busy with social contacts and

always knew some interesting gossip. S. gave me English lessons once a week in their elegant apartment near the Vltava.

Every Sunday, the same type of meal was served, right after the 12 o'clock news to daughter M. and her husband K. This time, we talked more of our immediate concerns : how to live in the post war society. K. was completely practical and unsentimental. He was straight to tell me when I did wrong. I was annoyed when too much conversation centred on that subject. I was impractical, sentimental, tending to daydream and did not like to be told. After all I was just sixteen. I knew that I had few friends. After all, football and hockey were not so important to me as to most others and when I read I liked to read what was close to me. K taught me Latin once a week in their apartment. K. and M. devoted greater effort to me and I knew they meant the right thing for me and they did care for me, but still I preferred the Saturday company.

I was introduced to music by Aunt and her family, when we all attended a gala concert devoted to Beethoven. From then on, I longed for more. I did not need company to stand in the stalls of the Smetana Hall or the Rudolfinum. All my sadness, rage and depression were revealed here and followed by the uplifting joy of the music. I discovered Opera, which as a combination of drama and music I considered to be the highest level of art. Quite often, on a Saturday afternoon, I attended a performance at the ornate National Theatre and then walked elated through the busy streets of the wonderful city. During one of our classes at school we were all required to prepare a short talk on any subject. I chose Beethoven, who struggled in his life and overcame his rage. After my talk, one of the brighter boys said that I was far too young to waste my interest on such subjects and I should leave this to "older women".

One day, my aunt told me that we were to be visited by Mrs Adler. My eyes lit up. The Adlers were people who moved to Budejovice after our country had to give up the Sudetenland in 1938. Fricek, a year younger, became my friend and his pesky sister Hana a teasing object. My sad day was when they left after a year to escape the clutches of the Nazis. During the war they moved first to Norway, then Denmark, and finally to Sweden where they stayed to the end. Now Hugo, Fricek's father, a TB specialist, returned to direct a spa in the northeastern part of Moravia. I was invited to spend my summer vacation with them. That meant a train journey with several stops and changes lasting an entire day.

Summer 1946 came. July I spent at a boy scout camp sharing a tent with a classmate, Pavel Gottlieb, a boy who remained my friend. His father had died in Auschwitz but Pavel spent the war with his mother in Prague. The camp was located at the edge of a forest along a meandering river. This was the summer during which political unrest in the world started again. The war had been over just a year ago and so many people suffered and lost their lives. Now, the talk was back on destruction. The great hero to so many and the mistrusted Dictator to others, Generalissimo Stalin was raging. In his own land he held tight control over the people and the army, and his quest to expand his

power began to roll. At the far end of the world, in America, the Atomic Bomb was to be exploded in a test. We all talked about it: will it, as many believed, commence a chain break up of all molecules in the entire world and thus end all?

In August I took the long trip to the Adlers. From the moment I arrived, my admiration for Fricke, my friend returned. We went swimming, bicycle riding, read books and laughed a lot. The Adlers lived a life of gentlemen farmers. They grew vegetables, raised ducks and rabbits. Hana, who was now 13, blossomed into a very pretty girl. We talked about politics, current movies and listened to records. The new state of Israel, the first Jewish state in two thousand years, was struggling to get established. Hugo, just like my father, looked towards it as the future for us. My father did not act, but Hugo did. First, they escaped Hitler and now they started to plan, if circumstances would require to move on. In 1946, all hopes for a democratic society in Czechoslovakia had not yet been lost. A free election held in the spring brought in a coalition of communists and other parties, with none of them overpowering the others. Fricke and I had enough fun not to burden ourselves with this. I returned to Prague with increased self confidence.

Part Three

Darkening Clouds

The year 1947 came in quickly. The streets of Prague were covered in snow and for the many old fashioned street cars moving in the city became difficult. The rooftops of Mala Strana and Hradcany displayed unusual beauty. There was hope in the air.

I started a notebook in which on the first page I expressed a hope for peace and understanding among the war time allies. My life at school improved and I made a few friends. I read all the books by Capek, Paul de Kruif's Life of the Microbes, The Story of Ste Michelle by Axel Munthe, the biography of Madame Curie, The Three Musketeers and a romantic book about the life of the greatest of the Pierrots. At the same time I saw a movie each week, favouring the serious works but also Hollywood light musicals. Once as I stood in a line for a movie in front of me I heard a conversation, which shocked me deeply. They talked about those horrible Jews, who came back, now that war was over and wanted all their possessions back. I saw memorable films like Alexander Nevsky, President Lincoln, The Children of Paradise and Stairway to Heaven. My interest in music did not diminish, but composers other than Tchaikovsky and

Beethoven became known to me. I even liked Prokofiev, Debussy and Bartok. Life in the 1940s was harsh and called for dissonance and disharmony to express the mood. My happiest days were when I went walking through the city, or went bicycling with some boys and stopped for ice cream. Then I felt like everyone else.

Politics began to show its ugly head. The struggle for power intensified. The communists, with the backing of Soviet Russia became aggressive. They wanted to have all the power. Sharing was not on their agenda. Stalin's rule became more cruel than ever and he wanted as much land around Russia as possible. The iron curtain started to descend between East and West. The system in the Soviet Union was to become the norm in all Eastern European countries. If not installed in an election, then by power of the sword. Daily propaganda was aimed at each of us from radio, newspapers, on billboards. Who was to preserve the freedom and achieve prosperity for all? The communists or their opponents. Who are the opponents? Are they the fascists and the greedy capitalists as proclaimed by the communists? People began to divide; they suspected one another for holding opportunistic goals behind their political feelings. Agitation was in full swing at school. I was confused. Did I say something in a discussion which they could accuse me of later? We all argued. Was it not the West, who betrayed our homeland and who is now arming itself with atomic weapons? When do things become so bad that freedom should be given away for expediency and when are false arrests justified to protect the good of the nation? There were pure, decent idealists, who threw themselves 100% behind communism. They attended lectures on Marx and went to demonstrations against the opponents.

Another summer came. My aunt Anda, sister of my mother came to visit from Innsbruck, where she had married as a young girl. She looked sad and tired. Her sister and brother had both been murdered by the Nazis. She knew like everyone else that life would never return to what it used to be. Her husband Robert, who was not Jewish helped to hide her during the war, and her two daughters, Eva and Pully survived in great humiliation. When Aunt came, she and I went to the National Theatre to see the joy of Czech music, the Bartered Bride. I stood in a line for hours to get tickets. The reason for this was that Jarmila Novotna, the greatest living Czech soprano came from New York to perform on this occasion.

August I again spent with the Adlers in the hills in Moravia. Fricek and I went for a long bicycle trip through hills and valleys of Moravia. There was so much beauty in my native land! We made it to Brno and Olomouc and Hodonin, the birthplace of the humanist president and founder of modern Czechoslovakia, T.G. Masaryk. We all wished we could hear his wisdom now, when needed so badly. (His son Jan cautioned against tyranny, whatever reasons given.) When we returned, I almost fell in love with Hana, who at fourteen was beautiful. I went for long walks with her. There was something telling me that life would take another turn. I lingered in the lovely woods and streams.

In the fall I entered the sixth year, known as sexta, of

the Gymnasium. This was now serious schooling, only two years away from the feared Maturita, matriculation. Then I would have to decide what to do later. Studying medicine, in the steps of my father, was the ideal, but was I capable of it? Would my lack of financial support stand in the way? Would the threat of political upheaval hinder me? Would I be willing to sell my integrity for a membership in a political party? Would my Jewish and bourgeois background interfere? Did I show the wrong political views? The wrangling in the country continued. In the world also. I read newspapers daily, cutting out important statements by politicians. Economically, things were not going well. Food supplies were diminishing; there were lineups at stores. School was closed on cold days due to coal shortage. My aunt and I began to worry that some day somebody politically well connected may wish to grab our beautiful apartment. Who would stand up for us?

The United States offered economic help under the so called Marshall Plan. Czechoslovakia, under pressure from Stalin did not accept. The iron curtain was drawn lower. I attended a concert of modern orchestral music. The cacophony of Honneger's symphony was what we lived now.

During all this my break came. I was told that as a Jewish orphan living in Europe, I would qualify for entry to Canada a country I knew nothing about, did not know anyone there and did not know the language spoken.

I applied.

At Christmas 1947, I went for a few days to Budejovice.

Then came the putsch: The only thing that it could be called. The so-called February 1948 Revolution set Czechoslovakia back into the middle ages for many years to come. On the day I left Prague, Jan Masaryk, the gentle son of TGM was laid to rest. He was either murdered or committed suicide.

Part Four

Emigrant- Immigrant

So many people this century made their move- from their homeland to a new land. All longed for a visa for America. Mine arrived in 1948; had it been issued a few years earlier, my family could have also become Canadian.

I never considered myself homeless, a refugee or a D.P. But I emigrated to a new land. The choice of whether to leave was my own. I never regretted it.

Those who make the same trip now in the days of instant travel leave their home at noon and arrive before supper, losing all the enormous challenge of change. We left Prague in early morning by an express train and after travelling for about sixteen hours arrived at the harbour of Bremerhaven in northern Germany. The trip across the choppy English Channel was rough. The ship was small and was tossed hither and yon. There were about thirty five of us in the group, mostly boys. We were all survivors, orphans, whom Canada was willing to take in and the Jewish Congress paid for us.

Now I was able to see the big city of London, that was a dream of all my classmates in Prague. We stayed in a dilapidated warehouse in Cheapside, the miserable East End, full of poor people living in slums, like I never saw before. A few of us ventured out to see the town. We saw the Buckingham Palace, where the Monarch resided, the Tower of London, Picadilly, the famous avenue and Leicester Square. While on Trafalgar Square, where Admiral Nelson sits on a high pillar, protected by roaring lions, we noticed a little man crossing the road to talk to us.

"You refugees," he asked. "Yes", we replied. "Jewish?" "Yes", we said. "Come home with me and meet my family". We went by the underground to visit the family of Phineas Goldenfeld. A sad wife, already greying, and two children. Regina, a girl of 18, with thick glasses and very dark hair and Lennie a boy of eleven. "These boys survived the Nazis and lost their parents", explained the little man to his family. Excited Lennie ran into the next room and returned immediately with a toy gun. "I will shoot them all". He was hard to contain. Mrs Goldenfeld served a modest meal and Phineas took us back to Trafalgar Square. My contact with that family continued and on each subsequent visit to London we met again. Regina married an Italian many years later and became a widow while still in her forties. But now I am getting way ahead of my two days in London on the way to Canada.

After two days, we were off again. On the train to Southampton I witnessed a strange incident, perhaps characteristic of the proud English. Two adult men were involved in a violent fist fight. A demand for an apology and a refusal to give it is what led to the squabble. Only when one ended up on

top of the other did train officials try to separate them. The rest of the passengers minded their own business and carried on reading or knitting as if nothing was happening. A few hours later came my first sight of the Ocean. A large ship, the famous Cunard Line "Aquitania" with its four funnels was standing there awaiting passengers. She had been a troop carrier in the war and accomodated over 8.000 troops on the overseas journey. Once inside I felt like a star in a movie. This was like an enormous hotel with hundreds of bedrooms, dining rooms, theatres, ballrooms and full of people of all descriptions. My first meal in the ornate dining room, consisting of many courses, was also my last one. Once we started to move, my stomach went into a whirlpool. It started to churn and I soon found myself on the upper deck throwing up. Then I went into the dormitory room, where a bed was assigned to me, and stayed there for the next two days. The trip in the worst winter weather lasted for five days. Waves as large as an apartment building were tossing the poor Aquitania from side to side. The creaking of the walls almost convinced me that I would never see Canada, but drown in freezing water in the Atlantic Ocean. On the fifth day, my fellow passengers urged me to go out on the deck and there I saw land again. First as a little speck, it grew larger until we landed. And this huge country to which I arrived was Canada. It means the strange land and for me my new home.

Into Another World

Into another world waves brought me;
 Goodbye Europe with old churches
 Away from the crooked streets
 And mattresses full of sweat

Into a new world a ship brought me
 Wave farewell to those left behind
 They would also like to start again
 But must stay behind to guard against...

Into a new world I was brought by a dream
 Never to see blood spilled again
 But can I really throw away
 The dreams that soiled my youth ?

Will I ever return to the old ?
 Will I ever see the stones of my fathers?
 Will I have to return
 To fight the old wars once again ?

(Originally written in Czech in 1948).

(In fact I did return to Europe many times to search for beauty and enjoyment. Only once, in 1956, I travelled alone on the "Grand Tour " of the major capitals. Later, I was always with my beloved wife, who shared with me the many exciting trips I made to Israel and most European countries. Italy remained our favourite and in 1989, we were permitted to visit the land of our births.)

TORONTO

From the ship, we travelled by train through the endless flat fields covered by deep snow and, after a stopover in Montreal, we arrived in Toronto. There were perhaps 20 of us, as some stayed in Montreal and some were heading for Winnipeg. Just like the little Mr Goldenfeld, who recognized us as refugees, a man on the train gave us each two dollars, so we did not arrive penniless. Our trip ended at the beautiful, cavernous Union Station.

Toronto was a medium sized city, with straight streets and, except for its centre of the town, known as "downtown", full of small private homes. There were practically no apartments like in Europe. The closer to the centre these homes were, the more dilapidated and closer to each other they were. Further out, there were larger villas surrounded by gardens. This was a country inhabited by English descendants and so each home was a castle and flowers belonged to it.

At the foot of the city lay a large lake. Lake Ontario, but in contrast with the cities of Europe, it was not a part of the city. In the downtown area there were unattractive medium sized office buildings and stores. In contrast with a European city, people lived relatively far away from where they worked or shopped. There was hardly any housing downtown, but only a few large hotels. To my sorrow, there were no theatres, concert halls or art galleries in town. Well, perhaps there were a few, but not in the glorious designs of Europe. A few people had private automobiles. To get around, one had to take a street car, which to my eyes was far more modern and efficient than those in Prague. There were few neon signs, to me signs of the city and only a few movie houses and restaurants. Lighting in the evening was poor. After all, a hundred years earlier, all that was here were a few muddy streets and a very small population.

Our little group was housed in a large home, referred to as a reception centre, provided and serviced by volunteer Jewish women. Later, this became a Jewish Library. The first few days, we did not venture far. I realized that learning English was a priority. A few teenage girls came towards the evening to talk to us. I became friendly with a seventeen year old girl, much

taller than I, who was from a very poor family, and whose concerns for humanity led her toward socialistic ideals. We took long walks and I tried to convince her that the ideology, which appears to support the people is merely using them for their unfair and inhuman practices. My English was too poor to express all that. This girl, many years ago married a man, whom she met at one of the "socialist gatherings" and who eventually became an alcoholic and left her alone with six children. It was only April, and school was still in full swing. I was urged to enrol in a nearby public school and actually sat for a few days in a class of twelve year old boys, just listening. I found this experience not only boring but also humiliating. After all, only a few months earlier I was translating the Latin passages of the poet Ovid.

Now a few words about some of my travel companions, with whom I have maintained contacts since. First there was Tomy N. a boy two months older than I. He was a handsome boy, almost pretty, with a fine chiselled nose and chin. Always popular and successful with girls, and later with money, he never suffered the self doubt and depression which has remained with me. At times I did envy him. Then there was Alex S. Nothing ever bothered him. When I met him, still in Prague, he lived with a sixteen year old girl, who expected marriage from him, a subject not even remotely considered by Alex at that time. Alex was a strong, good looking boy with a hearty laugh. In Toronto he became a barber and for years after, I travelled through the city for a haircut and to be cheered up by him. There were very few girls in our group. One of them, however, remained my long term friend. A wonderful woman, who at the age of fourteen was badly injured in Auschwitz, and yet survived. Miriam had a limp when we met in Prague, prior to our departure. She was the spirit among us. Always cheerful; she sang when times appeared bad. Being from an observant Jewish family in Trieste, she spoke Slavic languages as well as Italian. Miriam was taken into an orthodox family and married fairly young. Now, in 1991, she is a grandmother of 10 children.

The brilliant sunshine during my first spring in Toronto warmed me up and prepared me for a better future. My first job was as a busboy in a doughnut shop where I earned enough for room and board and saved for a brand new bicycle. I turned eighteen on June 6, 1948. Not knowing, I had much ahead of me that was good.

Klepy-----THE GOSSIP

In the spring of 1939 when the German army marched into my hometown and brought with it the Nazi ideology, I was nine years old. What had seemed like a worryfree childhood came to a sudden halt. A life of rules and exclusions began. I no longer remember what came first. Excluded from school, forbidden to meet with my (non Jewish) friends, not allowed into movies and public parks, prohibited from a public swimming pool in the summer and skating in the winter. "Jews not allowed" appeared all over. Then, to be identified, we had to wear a Star of David on all our outer garments. Did all this drive us to despair and underground? No way. The Nazis knew that as long as we were alive, we remained a challenge to their inferiority.

In our town there were about a hundred youngsters between the ages of 10 and 18. We wore our Star of David, but not in shame. Now excluded from the general community we formed our own. Schooling was improvised in small circles, the older boys and girls taught the early grades. I was ten years old and I learned my first Latin lessons. I still remember the "amo, amas, amat,...", and my introduction to Algebra. We read about animals and distant lands. We sang songs in a strange language, which until recently had been used only in prayer, Hebrew, and dreamed about the far away land where Jews

were making a fresh start.

In the summer of 1940, we were allotted a small playground, past our town, along the quickening river, the Vltava, near a railway bridge. Swimming past the shoreline was treacherous, especially for the youngest of us. But the older boys and a tiny boat were used to rescue the daredevils. Someone brought a soccer ball and a volleyball net. Eventually a ping pong table was put together.

As we all had daytime duties--the older boys and girls were learning trades and the younger, like myself, were helping the Nazis, unknowingly, in delivering messages in sealed envelopes. They inventoried our properties and compiled a list of addresses.

The moment we were finished with our duties, we rushed to our favorite spot along the river. We learned team sports and our friendships intensified. Every moment was cherished in the sun, and when it rained we huddled under trees. In addition to athletics and games, we sang and learned to love. Not the one to one relationship but respect for each other. There were fights also and sometimes we came home with a black eye.

When the days started to shorten and cool air returned, we knew a beautiful summer was coming to an end. Several of the older boys came to the conclusion that we must not hibernate but continue with our friendships. They started a

magazine and named it Klepy--Gossip. It was typed and illustrated and only one specimen was made. The first issue merely named and gossiped about the participants in our summer activities at the river. Subsequent issues had stories, jokes and incidents. Contributions by the readers were sought and published. All readers were given time for the single copy and were asked to comment.

When the summer of 1940 passed and only memories kept us warm, we looked forward to next summer. And it came.

From an issue of Klepy:

"What is the goal and purpose of our Klepy? First of all to prove that a healthy spirit and sense of humour is within us and that we are not diminished by the difficulties in our days. We are capable, in moments of rest from our labour to occupy our minds with worthwhile thoughts and humour..."

During the summer of 1941, threats to our lives became imminent. They did not come from our fellow citizens, but from the mad Dictator in Berlin...

We carried on in our playground along the Vltava. For me, it was the summer in which I won the first place in a ping pong championship (for ten to fourteen year olds). I had a story printed in the Klepy and a poem as well and a photo of my head on a soccer star covered a whole page of the magazine. It was the summer in which I learned that something stirs inside you when you touch the hair of your favorite girl.

There were twenty issues of the Klepy.

The summer days became shorter and cooler. We cherished each day and prayed that the summer of 1941 would never end.

Except for a handful of us, it was the last summer. The monster did his job to feed the insatiable appetite of those who would deny life to those who loved so much on the shores of the Vltava.

Elly's Story

It was the Jewish New Year 5739; a beautiful day in October 2, 1978. After attending services in the dignified Holy Blossom Temple, we came home to a festive lunch.

Elly, a girl of seventeen who lives in a student residence, spent the day with her parents and two younger sisters. At lunch, Elly told her family laughing "You know what my classmate Doug said to me yesterday, when I told him today was a Jewish New Year? He congratulated me for surviving all the persecutions. Isn't he crazy; nobody ever hurt me for my religion. After all, it's 1978."

When I heard Elly's story, I was not sure whether to be sad or rejoice. My thoughts turned to Elly's grandmother. Her name was Erna - a name which Elly was given as a middle name. Erna was my mother. I tried to remember her as she was on the last day of her life. The year was 1944; a hot July. Location- Birkenau, the extermination camp several kilometers from Auschwitz in Poland.

The day was hot; all day heavy smoke was seen rising from the two tall bulky chimneys, where bodies of victims gassed in adjoining halls were being burned.

Erna was sitting on the lower bunk of a three tiered bed. Her face was pale and thin; her once beautiful black hair was grey. Having suffered from stomach sickness for several years, she was weak and looked older than her 44 years. The

long barrack was lit only with a small bulb. People were moving about.

Her two sons Karel 17 and Honza 14 sat by Erna's side. The boys were dressed in loose rags and their shoes were far too big. Their hair was very short, as it had been shaved off several weeks ago.. As little boys the two often fought each other but now they sat so close that their bodies were touching. Erna was deep in thought. She thought of the happy past, her nice home, husband, trips to mountains, books and friends; all that was shattered by the heavy boots of the hated Germans and their insane dictator. She had always disliked the Germans and as a young girl she learned all the Czech poetry and songs.

The present was gloomy. Most of her friends had been killed and the family was all uprooted. She knew the fate which was awaiting her, but she hid it from her two sons. Instead she shared with them a piece of bread, which she saved from her supper - and she sang a few Czech songs. Her favourite song had a refrain "as long as our song lives, we live." Karel and Honza joined her.

They knew that tomorrow life - if there would be any - would be different. The camp in which they had lived for the past six months was being evacuated. The dreaded selections had been carried out. A tall, brutal looking Nazi officer dressed in a spotlessly clean uniform and shiny boots reviewed a quickly passing column of nude men and women and

18

with a flip of a finger ruled who was strong enough to be of some use to the Germans, and those whom feeding and housing was an unnecessary burden. These unfortunate victims were quickly led to death in the gas chambers.

Karel and the boys' father still had retained some strength and thus were selected for work in a distant factory.

Honza was only 14, and small for his age. The commander of the camp decided that about 100 boys between the ages of 14 and 16 could be useful in doing work around the camp. Honza was fortunate to be selected as one of the 100.

Now as the three sat together, they knew where they stood. For mother, the gas chamber was the last fate. They knew it but did not mention it. Erna knew what the next few hours would be like. Weeping, praying, - complete hopelessness. No comfort from anyone. They would go to bed for a few hours, be woken up still in the dark; they would be told to pack quickly and leave in the barracks to be counted by the S.S. guards. Anybody making a noise or showing emotion would be thrown on the muddy ground and kicked. Then the black trucks would arrive. Fifty prisoners piled into each truck; it would be so crowded that breathing would be a great effort. The motors would start. The trip to the gas chambers could not take more than 15 minutes, but to deceive the victims, they would drive in circles for two hours. The victims knew the trick; yet their hopes were raised. The end of the journey was always the same - death followed inevitably.

Erna kissed her two boys and sent them to their own barracks. Her only hope was that they at least would live long enough to live again.

When Karel and Honza left, Erna fell asleep, completely exhausted. She had a strange dream. In a distant land she saw tall mountains, vast open spaces and endless lakes. It was all so fantastic. Now the location switched to a small house with a family in it. At one end of a room stood a piano. A beautiful girl with flowing red hair was playing. The song sounded familiar - yes it was "Išla Marina do Cintorina - huja, huja ,hujaja' teče voda kalná'" The red haired girl sang it with a strange accent. Behind her on the dining room table stood two lit candles. The family was celebrating a Rosh Hashana.

Erna's dream was interrupted by stamping of big men in uniform. Everybody had to leave the barracks immediately. The black trucks were already there.

Erna did not weep. The dream lived with her till her last breathing moment.

October 28, 1978

APRIL

I

The tanks returned. It was a late afternoon, April 22 1945. Soggy fields - it had rained several days and a darkened sky did not augur for the end and a new beginning. Distant shots disrupted the quiet though depressing scene. Only a few hours earlier it had all looked different. The sun had spread its warm rays on the tanks as they rolled noisily down the road. They had first appeared from an opening in the sparse forest and then headed south. There was no opposition. The remains of the German forces disappeared, as if melted into the villages. The helmets of the broad faced G.I's reflected the blazing sun.

Along the roadside there were dead bodies. Thin, in shabby and torn clothes, they were the non-combatants; having never fired a shot or even been given a chance to fight for or against. They were the faceless remnants of the concentration camp inmates. Some had died of exhaustion and others by a bullet fired by the Nazi S.S. guards, whose major aim was to prevent the very moment all these still living skeletons had hoped for - liberation.

Why my body was not in the mud along the roadside I could not comprehend. A spark of life was still in me, when those beautiful G.I's appeared in their tanks. One of these young men lifted me on top of one of these noisy monsters

and fed my starved body. Then I climbed down and sat on a rock at the roadside. More than 50 tanks rolled by, then jeeps - and as quickly as they had all come they disappeared heading south towards the head of the bleeding monster. The sun hid behind the clouds. I dropped off the rock I was sitting on and fell asleep on the ground.

It had been all too much for my fourteen year old body. What woke me up was the loud noise of motors. In disbelief I sat up as I saw the long column of the American tanks approaching again - this time going North, returning on the same road.

Sweat and fear. The black and white film was now running backwards. I looked at the dead body alongside which I had been unknowingly sleeping - and collapsed in despair.

II

Many years have passed since the early spring 1945.

The Forties, Fifties, Sixties, and now the Seventies are gone. Light years and thousands of miles away.

I have never recovered. The tanks keep coming back ever so slowly. At times they disappear for long periods. Then I laugh, love and relax to be happy thinking foolishly that perhaps I have escaped and am like all those not contaminated by the stink in Auschwitz. I did not dream of wealth or glory but peace.

A shot shattered the silence. A single bullet - it landed

in my head. I collapsed into the arms of my beloved.

I was not surprised- I always knew it would come. The tanks moved closer.

"Give me some more time" I pleaded. The bullet in my head fell out leaving a wound which healed.

Will the tanks show up again?

Yom Kippur in Auschwitz

Pauli was the smallest of us boys, barely 12 years old. His face was pale and bones thin. None of us knew anything about his background. Unlike most of the other boys, Pauli was from Germany. We were Czech. Pauli learned to speak that strange language and spoke it with a funny accent.

Birkenau was an unknown village in Southern Poland; just outside of a lazy town called Oswiecim, Auschwitz in German. The principal features of this location was mud and in the mid 1940's death. They came in trains from all of German-occupied Europe. Mainly Jews, and also Gypsies and other undesirables to the Nazis. In Birkenau, they were unloaded and gassed, cremated and the ashes disposed of.

Only a few of those who came to this place were selected to live - at least for a while to carry on the chores of disposing of others. I was among a group of 90 boys aged 12 to 15. We lived in a long narrow barrack, slept in 3 decker bunkbeds, six to a double bed. Our work was "light"; in the winter removing snow, in the summer cleaning the camp or moving whatever had to be moved. We were kind of badly fed horses. Up at 4:30, each day, except Sunday when we could sleep until 5:30. The enemies were the elements - either too hot or too cold, hunger and fear. The ever pouring dark smoke out of the huge nearby chimneys reminded us that life could be snuffed out in a few miserable minutes.

September 1944 was an especially busy month. Constantly

darkened skies from the heavy souls of the murdered Jews.

We lived in barrack number 13. There were two rows of 15 such dwellings in each camp. Our neighbour was number 11. This is where the Special Commandos slept, crowded like we were in 3 decker bunks. The men of the special group were strong; selected for hard work and strong nerves, mostly in their 20-30ties. They carried out the basest tasks ever invented: they were workers at the Gas Chambers. Directing the living to the execution chambers, dragging the dead bodies out to the crematoria, they knew too much, but were well fed. Salami, dry meat, loaves of bread, cans of sardines - or anything that those coming to the camp brought with them. Contact with the men of the Special Commando was strictly prohibited, but for a short while, some of us defied the order and sneaked into barrack 11 at night. They enjoyed the visits of the younger boys and fed us royally. This was too good to last. A new order was issued to "strictly forbid" entry into barrack 11. Anyone found there would be "severely punished". We all knew these terms meant beatings and withholding of food.

Visiting the Special Commandos had stopped. The stomach hurt at night and the smell of delicious salamis was thousands of miles away.

September 20th came. It was just like any other day in Birkenau. The task of villany continued undiminished. Those who came in the sealed freight wagons, savoured a short while of fresh air before they breathed the last by

poisonous gas. It was Yom Kippur today, the holiest of all days for the Jews. On this day, if you do not curse God, you pray and you fast. Those who curse Him may not pray, but they will fast. In Birkenau, few of us deprived ourselves of the meagre daily ration. In the evening of the Day, hungry Pauli sneaked quietly into barrack 11 where the Special Commando were resting after a very busy day. It was somewhat different today. The men, many of religious background knew it was Yom Kippur. They whispered their sad prayers, standing in small groups. Pauli listened and joined his friend who usually fed him so generously. There was no food tonight. Even those who did not pray, refused to eat. Pauli was not of a religious background. This Holy Day meant nothing to him. With a sweat on his brow, he left immediately, returning to his barrack. A pair of arms seized him just outside the door. Pauli shrieked out in panic. His face was slapped several times by an S.S. man, big enough to crush the little boy with his feet.

"Please, please" Pauli pleaded to no avail. He was dragged to the little courtyard outside barrack 13. Thrown to the ground, he was kicked several times. He was hurting and weeping - a kid of 12 years. They found a cruel punishment for him. In a corner of the yard there stood a wooden box. They brought it into the middle of the yard. The lid was lifted and Pauli thrown in. Just enough air came in through the cracks so that he did not suffocate. He could neither lie, not sit in the box - but somehow

crouched in a between position.

The boys in the barrack saw it all. How he was dragged in, kicked and incarcerated. The punishment, like everyone was a warning to others. None of us uttered a word on this night of Yom Kippur. His whining voice and pleading tore in our ears, until we fell asleep. In the morning, there was no sound coming out of the box. Pauli exhausted also fell asleep. The cruel God took pity on him.

What happened to Pauli since that September 1944 day I do not know.

Of the 90 boys in barrack 13 about 35 survived the war. Pauli was one of them. He has lived in California; hopefully a good life.

The Hungarian Jewish Swine

Discipline inside the K.Z. camps was strict and unyielding. Punishment for offences was imposed by the S.S. guards; minor transgressions were dealt with by their willing helpers- the Block Eltesters. These men were themselves prisoners - almost all Aryan Germans, imprisoned for criminal offenses - murderers, defrauders, etc. They acquired certain privileges, such as a private room in the barracks, supplemental meals and in some camps a visit to a prostitute. They hung on to these advantages tenaciously by applying the strictest rules in the barracks. Some were more cruel than the S.S. Guards.

The worst of the Block Eltesters that I remember was Franz Stoker. The camp was called Flossenbourg, one of the oldest founded in the mid 1930's. It was located on a deserted hill, kind of a quarry, in Bavaria. The barracks were located on various levels, and in the middle of the camp stood two gallows, which were used on frequent occasions. The usual enemies of the inmates - hunger, fear of punishment, cold weather and physical exhaustion were plentiful in Flössenbourg. The men were not allowed inside the barracks until nighttime; after a work day, they had to spend a lot of time outdoors, either standing in rows or walking up and down in a very small space.

The day I arrived in this camp - it was in February 1945 -

fresh snow had fallen. It was bitterly cold. As the first step in the camp, we were taken for a shower in a small barrack at the edge of the camp. It was late at night. After the cold shower we were chased, stark naked through the snow into the barrack, which was to be our new home. Prisoner clothes were thrown at us. The barrack was already occupied by other inmates and as newcomers we were not particularly welcome. We were told soon, Beware of Franz Stoker, the Block Eltester. He stood there, grey haired, a brutal looking, dissipated man of about 50, but looking more like 70. "This is not a sanatorium," he shouted as he kicked the last man filing in.

Up early next morning, we were assigned our jobs. Mine was to carry goods from one part of the camp to another - clothes, building materials, etc. I was weak after all the travel of recent weeks. A large bundle of blankets was thrown at me to take up the hill. I became faint and collapsed. Someone behind me picked up the bundle, leaving me on the ground. I recovered and went back to carry more blankets.

Franz Stoker was angry. He knew that Hitler and the whole system was collapsing - it was up to him, Stoker and others like him to punish the enemies. His great hate of the Jews was undiminished. He had one expression for us, the "Hungarian Jewish Swine." They were to be punished. There were about 150 of us of that description in his barrack; the rest were political prisoners from various subdued countries. The "Hungarian Jewish Swine" had to be segregated from all

others. He decided to build a ghetto in the barrack for them. We were waiting outdoors in the cold March wind as Franz with the help of prisoners was preparing the ghetto. A corner of the barrack was set off, a roped off area with sleeping space for perhaps 40. Five "Hungarian Jewish Swine" were packed into each bunk. There was enough space to sit, body to body and try to sleep in this position. Fifteen persons to a three storey bunk; at night many fell off down to the ground with a big bang and a painful groan. Some could not get up and were dragged out to the infirmary, where several hundred prisoners were lying on the ground, without the slightest help from anybody.

Franz was raging while we were allowed to file into the new quarters on the first night. We stank, we were ugly and swine. He stood on a chair with a rubber hose in his hand. With all his strength he lifted his right hand with the hose which landed on our heads. When my time came, I staggered under the blow - and kept going into the roped off narrow area.

Franz Stoker finished his job that night - while 150 of us sat up huddled like sardines for a short sleepless night.

I do not remember how long we stayed in this ghetto. The time for liquidation of Flossenburg came as the American Army approached with tanks and artillery. We were evacuated - there were no camps left - so it was into the fields and bush, wet from constant rain - that we were led on the death marches.

Few survived this ordeal. One of these was Franz Stoker

but not for long. His cruelty and loathing was not forgotten. He met his end; condemned to death by those he had tortured, he was hung from a tree. His punishment was well deserved.

My Friend Peter

The chimneys were busier than ever. Heavy smoke was pouring constantly out of them and spreading into the surrounding area. You got used to the smoke and the constant smell, but never to the fear of being burned next. The fear was with you day and night.

This was Birkenau, the extermination camp, a few miles out of ~~Ausch~~chwitz.

I was in a group of ninety-nine boys all under fourteen years who by some unforeseen luck were spared, perhaps only temporarily. We lived in a long, frame barrack - on one bowl of soup, a piece of bread, a warm water called tea. Our work consisted of pushing a wagon, thus doing the work usually done by a horse. We loaded it with sand or logs, and shovelled snow. In the evening after our dinner of bread and tea, we could walk around the barracks in the camp for a few hours. Our camp was for men; there was another such camp alongside and one for women on the other side. The women suffered even more than the men. With their heads shaved, dressed in terrible loose rags, they looked hopeless.

One day, as I was standing close to the electrically charged fence which divided our camp from the neighbouring one, I noticed a man in the other camp trying to arouse my attention. Just like all the other prisoners his head was shaven and he was dressed in a pyjama-like striped uniform. He was about forty years old. I don't remember what language he spoke, probably a mixture of Polish, Hungarian and German. Carefully, I

came close to the fence, knowing well that touching it I would instantly be electrocuted. The man looked sad - he had tears in his eyes. He asked me my name and age, and then told me that he had a son of about my age. I would not ask what happened to the son, as we both knew and almost automatically turned towards one of the great chimneys, from which, as at most of the time, heavy black smoke was rolling. My new friend's name was Peter. As we were talking, suddenly he raised his hand high and waved in the direction of the camp which was adjoining ours on the other side. A smile appeared on his face. In the distance I saw a woman's hand returning the greeting. This was Peter's wife. Peter told me how badly she was bearing the life in the camp and that he was afraid that she would not last much longer. He loved her dearly and wanted to share with her the little food that he could save from his own. He threw two pieces of bread over the fence, a smaller one for me and the larger one, that he asked me to take to his wife. I picked up both pieces, checking that no one saw me. I ran across the width of the camp to the fence where Peter's wife was standing. She was of middle height, dark and perhaps had been beautiful. In her camp attire and shining head, she was a pitiful sight. I threw her the bigger piece of bread; she picked it up and ate it. Her eyes were full of tears. I was thinking of my parents- my mother who had been gassed several months ago and my father who had been sent away on hard labour. At that moment perhaps I did not realize

fully the tragedy taking place, day after day, or perhaps my will to survive was stronger than any other feeling.

I left Peter's wife; it was time to get back into the barrack. I ate my payment for my message. It tasted good.

From that day on, I came back to the fence each day to talk to Peter. He liked me and I had a grown up friend. We talked and then I carried a piece of bread to his wife and got my payment for that effort. She usually cheered up when she saw me coming. I always carried the message from Peter - I love you, and we'll be together soon again.

Like everything in the camp - frequent changes occurred and usually for the worse. One day, I came to Peter's camp fence - he was no longer there. The entire camp had been evacuated the previous night. What happened I do not know. Peter's wife noticed also that her husband was gone. She waved at me and I waved back, but did not go to her side of the fence. I have never seen or heard of them again.

The heavy smoke from the chimney was spreading around the camps.

The Gypsy Boy and I

The Nazis treated the Gypsies as badly as the Jews. There was a similarity between them...the large and close family formations, who always stuck together looking at the outside as the enemy. They were beautiful people, looking somewhat like light Indians.

There was a field, outside of my town, just across the river, where there was a colony of Gypsies. They lived in covered wagons with horses grazing around. The men had odd jobs in town and the women and children sat around or played games. The children's eyes were like black diamonds, shining and piercing when they looked at you. Their language was incomprehensible to me. Mother used to say, don't go near the Gypsies, they will take you away. A likely story, as they had already more children than they could feed. Every once in a while, the colony would disappear, probably moving to another part of the country or pushing across the borders to Austria and south to Italy to avoid the cold weather.

Several years later, when the war was over and some of the Gypsies survived it, they were lost. Cut off from their lives and families, they wandered around aimlessly. I was once on a train travelling from Prague to Brno. The train was so crowded that I could only stand, practically body to body against other passengers for the three hour journey. The body I was pressing against was a beautiful Gypsy girl, perhaps

16 years old. Her well formed body and the loose clothes she was wearing did something to me which I did not understand, as I was only 15 myself. Her eyes were beautiful - both kind and fearful. We stood there in the moving train, not exchanging a single word. A lot of strong feelings were pouring out of me to her, but never reached her. I left the train in Brno, and never saw her again.

My one previous encounter with the Gypsies was in Birkenau. At that time I was in the "Mannerlager", the men's camp. It consisted of a long stretch of muddy road with two rows of barracks for the inmates. Along one side of this camp, there was a camp for women and along the other, one for Gypsies. Electric power fences divided these groups from each other.

The Gypsies were there because like the Jews, they were to be exterminated. They were undefended people, a tiny group with support from nobody. Strangers in the country with no country they could call their own. In the image of the perfect man dreamed up by the mad dictator and his advisors, it was the tall blond men who were to own the earth. The Gypsies, dark and good looking when young, but fat and ugly when old, with rotten teeth from neglect, dressed shabbily and talking a gibberish language should be wiped out, gassed just like the Jews. Who would care?! So, they were in Auschwitz, awaiting death.

One day as I wandered to the electric fence dividing us from the Gypsies, a young boy called me from the other side

"Look" he said, showing me a large bowl of mustard "Do you want?" "Sure" I said, "Bring bread, " he called back.

I always liked mustard; it spices up food, it would be good with the dry bread, which was all we ever got, except for soup and tea. I returned next day at the same time to the fence, having saved my full bread ration for the day. I was afraid to put my hand through the electric fence, but the Gypsy boy was not; "Throw the bread" I did and he immediately passed the large bowl with mustard through the fence, and ran away. I took the bowl and also ran with it. I could probably trade some of the mustard for bread, it occurred to me. The bowl was heavy - far too heavy. I put my finger into the pot. I did not laugh or cry, but realized I had been taken. There was a thin layer of mustard on top over a potful of sand. The Gypsy boy was gone, probably enjoying his extra bread ration. He earned it by sticking his hand through the electric fence.

As I say, the gypsies were the same as us Jews and all other people.

At the Shores of the Vltava

When I was seven years old, Slavia Praha, my favourite soccer team won the European Cup. Pláňická, the handsome slim goalie saved many goals in the most spectacular actions, by tossing himself from one corner of the goal across 20 feet into the air and so keeping the ball out of his net. In the last minute of the game, Jaroslav Skopecky, the 19 year old star of Slavia shot the ball to the net of the startled Holland team - and we won! I was so excited - all the action was coming over the radio- that I could not stop talking about it and then dreamt of becoming a famous sportsman.

Like all the boys in my neighbourhood, I always dribbled the ball, passing it to my fellow teammates or taking a shot at the goal. My success was slow in coming.

The first game that I succeeded in was not soccer but the tennis played on the table-Ping Pong. I played at the Municipal swimming area in Budějovice. This place was built at the edge of town, along the Vltava River. It had two fairly large swimming pools, one a shallow one for non-swimmers, and the other with depth to 8 feet. Those daring enough could swim in the fast flowing river - but I stayed far away from it. Along the two pools there was a nicely landscaped area for small children, and wooden planks for sunbathers. In one corner was a collection of small buildings, where you could buy refreshments, and also play ping-pong. I spent a lot of time on improving my game.

These were happy summer days of 1938. The grown ups were

disturbed when ever they listened to the radio, but nothing bothered me. These happy days came to an abrupt end. When I was nine, our country was invaded by the Germans, our neighbours from the West. They came in tanks, armoured cars and brought with them the horrid Nazi Laws. From then on, a sign appeared "Jews not allowed." I was thrown out of school, out of movies, parks and playgrounds. I could no longer play with my non-Jewish friends. My father lost his job and we had to live off his savings.

But life went on. There were perhaps 200 Jewish youngsters to the age of 18 in Budějovice. We were allotted a playground along the Vltava just about a few km. out of town. It was called "U Voříšků" named after the farm owned by the Voříšeks who leased us the patch between the fields and the river. We bicycled, jogged, walked or ran there and it soon became a hub of activity. Swimming in the river - only one way down the stream, which was quick and not past the middle. The water was dirty with sewage floating freely about. One never put his face into the water.

We played soccer along the narrow field and when the ball ended up in the river, as it often did, it took several minutes to retrieve it. I was ten years old then, and always played soccer with the older boys. I played the defense position. I was small, tough and daring, and stopped every attack on my team's goalie.

We were publishing a magazine called KLEPY a Czech word for gossip. It was handwritten and full of jokes and decorations. In one of the issues there was a large photograph, across the

entire front cover of the tough defence man Honza Freund. I stood erect, resting my right foot on the ball. I was a hero and loved it. My real success however, was in ping pong. We had two tables situated in a sheltered spot behind the changing cabin. I played as often as I could. Towards the end of the second summer, there was a tournament. We were divided into groups of under 10 years, 10-14 and 15 and older. I had an early success, eliminating most of my opponents quickly. Then came the semi-finals and the finals. I won every game. Then at an evening ceremony I was awarded a brand new white cork racket and a plaque with my name engraved on it. Then there was dancing and singing. I felt they all liked me. These youngsters were my friends. There were the Harry's, Jirka's, Pavels, Karels, Rudlas, the Lilkas', Ritas, Ankas, Suzans, Lidias and Ceciliias. There were Poppers and Kopeřls, Kohns, Herzes and Holzers, Frishes and Stadlers and Levys - most of the names I have forgotten. They were young, enthusiastic and mischievous, but never hurt each other or even a mouse.

The two summers of 1940 and 1941 were among my happiest. Some days we worked on the Vorisek's Farm. We helped in harvesting. I held a large canvas bag under a chute which filled it with oats or wheat. We received a large slice of fresh white bread thickly covered with goose liver and fat.

I encountered sickness and near disaster. The disaster ended up well. One of the boys riding his bicycle wildly through a field suddenly plunged into a deep open sewer. He gave a yell - his face and whole body was buried deep in the mess. Help came quickly - the biggest boys formed a chain and pulled Roubicek up.

He was then dumped into the river and came white faced back up.

The sickness I became acquainted with was far more serious. It was epilepsy. Two of our boys were afflicted with it. The saddest was Fricek K. He was new to Budějovice, having come from the Sudetenland a few years earlier. He was always together with his cousin Erich. They were both 10 years old. Fricek had frequent epileptic fits, sometimes as often as every half hour. He fell to the ground, lay on his back, emitting terrifying shrieks. When this happened, his cousin Erich was always with him, opening his mouth, which was full of froth, and pulling his tongue out, and caressing his forehead. The sick boy shook wildly for 3-4 minutes and then appeared to be in a deep sleep. for another few minutes. After that he got up, looking weak and dizzy. This frightening event recurred many times each day.

The other person with the same affliction was the old Mr. Papa, anyway that's what we called him. He was a confectionery vendor. He had a wagon with candies, apples and chocolate bars, and could always be found in the shade under the large railway bridge. I used to buy a chocolate rum ball from him, whenever I could afford it. His epilepsy was quite different. His attack came only once every two weeks. He fell on his back, breathing heavily, and lay in this state for almost a full hour. There was nobody qualified to do anything with him, other than give him a glass of water when he came to. He then did not show up for a few days - but then he came back with a fresh supply of apples, chocolate bars and candy.

The summer of 1941 came to an end. We still went to "U Vořisků" in the fall and sometimes in the winter, to walk around and look forward to the next summer. But that was not to be. In April 1942, all the Jewish Community, counting just under 1,000 -were taken from their homes and resettled in ghetto Terezin.

Terezin was a small town, full of large armouries, and small houses for the poor civilian population. Around the entire town there was a high wall with gun emplacements as this was once a garrison. Escaping from here was almost impossible - and punishable by hanging in the public square for those who had tried.

I lived in a converted school. It had 10 classrooms, all of which were made into dormitories. There were 40 boys, all my age, in Room 9, which was on the second floor. We had a leader - a Madrich - a man perhaps 20 years old. His name was Arno, and he earned great love and respect from all the boys. Amid alot of misery we managed to have a good time. We played ping pong - the tables were not professional, but good enough for a lot of heavy competition. I competed in our room and placed second, which then entitled me to compete in the school tournament. Two of the best players from each room qualified. I had to play every single competitor and ended in the sixth place. It was not a great success but I had done quite well.

My big day came on a sunny Sunday afternoon, in the fall of 1943. It was the final game in the soccer tournament for the school - known by the address L417. Room 9 - that was mine, played against Room 2. We played hard. We had cleared our minds

of the fear of deportation and the lack of freedom.

There were a couple of hundred spectators. Room 2 started briskly. Soon they were leading 2:0. The first half of the game was over. They looked relaxed and we were tense. Alex S. scored for our side just within 2 minutes of the second half. The game now gained momentum. We rushed around without letting up and in the 12 th minute, scored again. The game was tied 2:2. As this was the final game, there had to be a winner. Both sides played defensively for the fear of letting another goal pass into the net. The ball was bounced lifelessly from one end to another. The second half came to an end with no winner. After a 10 minute break, we resumed the game. It became rough now. We were tired and edgy. At about the third minute of the game, the referee blew his whistle. Pavel B. of team Room 2 tripped one of our players. This calls for a penalty shot against Room 2. The shot was to be taken from well inside the field, it rarely results in a goal from that distance.

"Johnny" shouts the captain of my team, "You take it". I was Johnny.

It is a free kick on the goal. I take a long run at the ball. My shoe hits the ball just at the right angle. The ball rises quickly, it heads straight at the goal - or just slightly above it. The goalie sees it coming, he stretches and jumps - but the ball slips in just an inch above the outstretched fingers. It's a goal! The spectators roar with approval. My fellow players grab me and hug. I am their hero. The long game is over and we, Room 9 won the tournament!

This was a great day for me. I can still see the ball

going into the net behind the desperate goalkeeper.

The summer of 1943 left quickly and was taken over by the gloomy fall. November proved to be the saddest month of my life. We were being deported EAST, whatever that meant. We knew things would get worse. My mother came to help me pack the few pair of socks and underwear and a warm sweater. The same evening I said good-bye to all my friends - who somehow escaped this transport. We shook hands and said nothing. We spent the night in a large dark warehouse, and the next morning, were put in a sealed freight train for a long trip to hell from where almost no one returned alive.

I returned. Out of the young people in Budějovice there were probably 2 or 3 and I only know for sure of two others who came back. I spent the summer of 1945 in the town and in a tiny village nearby, where a nice family took me to be a companion to their 10 year old son. I was in no mood to make friends. I spent a couple of nice afternoons in the Municipal Swimming Area, lying in the sun and splashing in the pool. The sign "Jews not allowed" was no longer there. It was not necessary because all the Jews - almost all - of Budějovice had been killed.

I was depressed for many months, before I started a way to recovery.

The saddest afternoon I spent when I walked over to our swimming area "U Voříšků". It looked exactly the same as it had 4 years earlier, but it was so quiet there. Where were the voices of the happy kids and the constant clanking of the ping pong balls? Where was the old epileptic Papa with his candy

wagon under the railway bridge? I sat down on the bench, the same on which my parents sat a few years earlier and had a picture taken.

I was not trained to say a formula prayer, but instead I recollected and named all those wonderful kids who were so young and now no more. I noticed that I was being observed from above. There on a telephone line sat a couple of hundred starlings, young souls, chippering happily away. The early evening sun was reflected in the calmly flowing Vltava.

I walked away and have never returned to the U Voríšků again.

Hijacked!

Jammed inside a large steel-frame vehicle.

Men , women and children, old people. They are terrified and shocked. Only a few days ago, they were in the comfort of their homes - illusions of safety.

The heavy door is now sealed tight.

Outside, there are uniformed guards clutching their machine guns. Only one wrong step - they warn you - and a bullet pierces your head.

We huddle, like cattle going to slaughter, in our seats or on the floor. Whimpering children are silenced by their parents "Don't make noise, that will make things worse." We grumble but are too frightened to fight with our bare hands.

Next to me sits an old woman. Her face is solemn. I think she and I had met somewhere else before; under different circumstances. She does not know me, though. Then I was a child and she my age. Now we are both old and grey.

Hours pass.

It is dark now, both inside and outside. The mood among the passengers is one of hopelessness. "Does anyone care - or even know?" we ask ourselves.

Finally there is a move. The wheels under us move faster and faster.

A dull ache in my stomach. I am trying to think, why, why again? Is it a bad dream or reality?

The journey is long; some people and most children have fallen asleep. The air is warm and stuffy. At the back, someone prays loudly - his wailing voice provokes despair in me.

I look out through the little window by which I sit. Outside it is dark - only an occasional light somewhere in the distance reminds me of another world. One in which people go about their lives unthreatened.

Hunger now joins fear.

Then I fall asleep.

A jerk under us and a loud bang wake every one up. Our vehicle comes to a hard stop. The doors are flung open to an intensely bright sunshine.

Uniformed men with machine guns all around. They shout orders. Their faces are as cruel as their intentions.

"Out, heraus!"

"Quickly, schnell!"

Some of our guards are blond, others have black faces. They laugh at us as we stumble about in the intense heat. We are exhausted and hungry, but no one offers anything but stiff orders. We have to line up in rows of five. The blond European proceeds to count us. Suddenly a huge black man drives close in a jeep. He steps out. His grizzly face is beaming with animal joy. Amulets and decorations hang on his light green uniform. He screams incomprehensible words - yes insults - at us.

107

We are ordered to march towards a low, frame building with small windows.

The excited black commander drives next to our column. He continues shouting. He is all powerful.

We are a collection of tired people with scared children. He accuses us of every crime in the book; a litany of complaints. If only we were punished and dead, the world would have no problem. Yes, we are the enemies.

Sweat drips down the face of the raving leader. He pulls out his gun and fires into the crowd. The quiet old woman, who had sat next to me in our journey collapses; her forehead covered with blood. The hateful leader laughs - His name is Amin Mengele.

I know that this is the very end. At one time - for years-I thought I had been liberated - but it was all just an illusion. The long journey in a crowded wagon, the uniforms and guns, the crying of children and fire at the end of the trip.

I feel a burn on my forehead; my face feels like it is ablaze.

As I fall I see a mirage, but am too far gone to distinguish dream from reality. The big black man is now holding his arms above his head. He no longer screams; his cap is on the ground. Instead of his crude voice, I hear singing - the children have broken into a joyous song.

The red spots in front of my eyes become blue; I fear no more. I feel no more.

November 24 /80

LITTLE RUDY ON THE DEATH TRAIN

The first week of January 1945 was bitterly cold. It had been snowing for days. The taste of snow, a piece of bread and my little friend Rudy; those are a few of my memories from those dark days, weeks and months.

Travelling by train was always my childhood joy. Those were the days of the steam engine puffing along the shiny rails. The thrill of a winter vacation was a visit to my grandparents in the big city. I would sit by the window of a well heated train, munching on a chocolate bar and watching the colorful ever-changing landscape. Then I would return to the small town which was my home. But that was in peacetime - ages ago and hundreds of miles away. Now I was travelling again, but this train had no windows and there was no roof. It was a freight train usually reserved for hauling coal. Instead of coal, however, there were men aboard; very many, some women and a few boys. I was fourteen and my friend Rudy was perhaps a year younger. We were from the same town. There was a group of ten of us, boys, back home. After we were thrown out of school, when the Germans occupied our country and declared us non-people, we used to get together to play games, go for walks and get into mischief. Rudy was the best chess player. I don't recall what became of the others. I think the two of us were the last still alive.

This was war. The worst ever. We were non-combatants, Jews chased away from our homes, put into camps and killed in gas chambers. The fortunes of the Nazis had turned, and the Russians were advancing into Poland and further west. The camps were being evacuated and the inmates moved into interior Germany. We had started on foot, several thousand inmates in prison garb. Everyone was given a blanket, a loaf of bread and a can of meat. We marched all night and rested in mud and snow on our blankets during the day. That was the first day. The second night many could no longer march. They fell behind and were shot dead. The cruel uniformed SS guards, shouting orders, shot the tired at close range. By the second day the food was eaten and the blanket too heavy to carry. I dropped mine somewhere in the snow.

Finally, those of us still around--and there were many--came to a small border town with a railway station. It was good to see the train; at least we would not have to march again. The train consisted of an old steam engine and many wagons--coal wagons. We were piled in. There was not enough room for all the men, so they pushed until they were able to close the gate. We could not sit, so many bodies standing and leaning against one another. The train stood in the station for hours, at least half a day, before it moved toward evening.

It started to snow again, but at least we were moving.

Nobody knew the train's destination or how long it would take to get there. There was a bit of hope as long as the train kept going. Nobody talked. We stood in silence. If somebody needed to urinate, he was shoved along the edge of the wagon, he did what he had to into a pot, poured it from the moving train and was shoved back to his place. I noticed my friend Rudy not far from me. I inched toward him. He was cold, hungry and as miserable as I. There was nothing to eat.

The hours lingered on. The first night on board passed. The older men lost their strength and could not stand. Their tired bodies started to lean on others and had to be held up until they collapsed. Then they were taken out at the next station and shot dead by the SS guards. When is my turn? How long will I last?

On the second night, I fell, dropped to my knees. I yelled out. The man on whose feet I fell could have kicked me over and I would have been taken out and shot at the next stop. But he extended his arms to me and pulled me up. "He is just a little boy". I heard him say. Rudy and I now held on to each other. When morning came we were passing through small villages in Moravia. People outside formed a chain. They moved along the train, throwing in chunks of bread, rolls, and apples. How good this was; what good people outside. Rudy and I shared everything we caught. He was luckier than I; his hands were full yet he divided it all

evenly. We ate what we could and filled our pockets too. As soon as the SS guards realized what was happening they turned their weapons on the Moravians, clearing the space near the train. The nourishment we caught helped to keep us going for a while.

The next night was bitterly cold. Still in the open train, we no longer had to stand. So many men had been taken off and shot that there was room to sit and even to lie on the cold floor. Rudy caught a bad cold and was coughing heavily. I fell asleep, covered with some old rags. My pockets had been emptied of every crumb that I had picked up earlier that day. I slept in fits--waking up and falling asleep again. I did not know where I was. I dreamed of my home, taking a warm bath, of pajamas... Rudy was lying near me. He was feverish, babbling. His voice was weak but clear. "Hello, boys" he said. "I have a jug full of hot soup. Come and get it. Hot soup, thick soup. Here is the jug, it's full you see..." He could not go on. His cough was getting worse. Rudy fell asleep and woke up again. "Come get the good, thick hot soup."

"Shush," somebody shouted at him, but Rudy, in delirium, walked around holding the imaginary soup jug. Someone kicked him. Rudy fell. It was a slow long night. We passed through my home town. "This is my town," I shouted. "You see there, this is the street where my home is." Nobody listened. I

thought of jumping off the train, but did not have the strength to do it. Would I ever see my home again? Would it still be my home? I fell asleep again.

When I next awoke it was already light. The body of a little boy, blue from cold lay next to me. His clothes had been torn off. Rudy. My good friend who shared his bread with me the previous day. At the next stop they threw his body out.

I kept going, another day and another day on the train. Another few months. More camps. More marches. Something sustained me, until the day when the cold winter finally broke into the sunshine of May and my liberation.

HURRAH! HERE WE ARE AGAIN

Inside The Third Reich.

It was a hot, oppressive day in early August.

1944.

Dry, scorched gravel and dust blew around the long frame barracks. This day was not different from other days in the Birkenau Concentration camp near Auschwitz. For many months now, trains, long trains of cattle wagons, were arriving daily full of people and leaving empty. Ready for another load. This was the last stop on the long journey. Many died of dehydration or illness on the way. The living, those who arrived here were lined up along the railroad tracks, and with a few exceptions, were marched to their deaths by gas....

The large factories just outside the Birkenau Camp, with huge chimneys spouting fire and smoke, were furnaces burning those killed by gas. The stench of burning and smoke spread along the large area.

In camp "D", known as the "Mannerlager" there were three thousand men. They were young, having been taken out of transports consigned to death in the gas chambers, to do menial work inside the camp complex. Several hundred of them were engaged in the task of disposing of the bodies of those gassed in the crematoria. They were known as the "Special Commandos." Other work crews were assigned to nearby

ammunition factories or maintenance of the railroad.

Tension was great inside the Mannerlager on this Thursday.

Rumours persisted and fed anxieties. There was to be another selection. That meant that all those in the camp were to line up in the nude, and Dr. Mengele or his assistant, with a flick of his finger could consign anyone to the gas to be murdered with the new arrivals at the gas chambers. There were rumours of the military defeats of the Nazis. The Americans, it was whispered, landed a huge army in France.

On this day, two of the inmates of camp "D" took a step which sealed their lives. This is the true story of the two, Manny and George.

Manny was twenty six years old. He had been a good student in his native Cracow. His ambition was to study physics, but the war changed all that. The German Pancers overran the town, killing all in their way. Manny, like all other Jews, was surrounded and deported to a concentration camp. Separated from his family, he was moved from one camp to another until he came to Birkenau, in southern Poland. When he arrived at the Mannerlager, Manny was assigned to work on railroad maintenance. Two tracks lead from Auschwitz about ten kilometers to Birkenau. There were several sidings to prevent a scheduling backlog. This is where sealed cattle wagons brought the Jewish civilians to their wholesale deaths.

The rails required frequent repairs.

George was a young man from a small border town in Czechoslovakia. His good looks and manners concealed his great anger. He was angry when his beloved country was invaded by the Germans, with their Nazi ideology. His anger exploded when he was pushed off the sidewalk by a German soldier who demanded something in a language he did not speak, but learned to despise. He was angry because the University he was going to attend was closed down by the German invaders. George could no longer contain himself. He spat into the face of a flag waving Nazi, during one of the frequent parades in town. He was immediately seized by two SS guards and beaten. Then without a trial, George was shipped to a concentration camp, and ended up in Birkenau.

Manny and George met in the Mannerlager, in the railroad commando. Full trains arrived and empty ones left. It was not enough to kill the innocent, but the hate and manliness of the killers was enhanced by their brutality. Uniformed SS men and German prisoners, usually murderers ruled inside the camps.

Manny and George worked side by side. They marched out of the gate of the Mannerlager every morning at six thirty to the sound of marching music provided by a band of inmate musicians. Twelve hours later, tired, they returned. During the day, while working together, they talked, argued and

dreamed. Out of this came a plan, an insane plan. They considered their chances of survival to tell what they saw each day. "When the last train departs, it will be our turn." On that they agreed. They planned an escape. A few other had tried it, and one or two were successful.

There was a small wooden shed for storing tools near the tracks. There they stored, piece by piece, the civilian clothes in which they would run. They accumulated food for a few days, a flash light and a couple of knives. They had no access to a weapon for defending themselves.

The appointed day came. A routine working day.

At six thirty, in the evening, the work crews return to the gate of the camp. They march in rows of five past the gate. The band is playing marching music. The SS guards count the group as it passes and checks the total list prepared on the departure in the morning.

"Halt. Stop." screams corporal Barda, the most brutal of the SS men.

He counts again. His face is red with rage.

"Name group and number of inmates" he shouts at the foreman.

"Group B, railway maintenance commando, thirty eight men" answers foreman Bloch.

"There are only thirty six here now!" cries out Barda in great agitation. By now he is joined by other SS men.

"Where are the missing swine?" With his fist, Barda hits the foreman across his face, who stumbles to the ground. Two other SS men grab him, kick him and then drag him to stay up.

The camp commander has been summoned and he runs to the telephone in the guard booth to call Birkenau central command. It does not take long. Sirens are heard. Their ominous wail fills the air. Motorcycles have started and are moving in the direction of the railroad. Dogs have started their murderous howling bark.

There is absolute silence inside the camp. The inmates of the Mannerlager shudder in fear. Who escaped? What is going to happen to them when they get caught? What is going to happen to all, if they are not? The Nazis are trained in group punishment.

Running away has been attempted several times and almost always was unsuccessful. When captured, the escapees were pulverized and drowned in their own blood.

George and Manny hid in the tool shed. They were not missed by the others who were too tired and hungry to notice their disappearance. They had to act quickly. They changed into civilian clothes, filled their pockets with food and small tools. They had enough money to buy bicycles if they only get away fast enough to mix with people in the nearest town. Daylight was against them. In the winter, in complete darkness their chances would have been better. It was just

past seven, when the sirens were heard. The two escapees were one kilometre away along the railroad tracks. They were running and hiding, hiding behind posts and railway cars on the spur line. This was no mans land. Flat and dry, like a moonscape. The heat was intense. No wonder this place was chosen by the Germans for their crimes.

They needed one more hour to get to safety. Both men were young and still fairly strong. But, but. The impossible was outside of their reach. The loud roar of motorcycles approached the tracks quickly and the dogs were not far behind. To hide, against hope, they climbed inside a pile of coal. The hungry and angry dogs ripped into the men. They tried to fight them with their bare hands.

It is after eight o'clock. Three thousand men in the Mannerlager stand in rows of five, between the barracks. The daily counting usually takes place right after the return of the work crews, and then supper is given. Tonight, all have been standing almost two hours. There was no meal tonight. The enraged SS men charged at anyone who moved out of line and kicked or slapped at random. Yes, these were the enemies of the Third Reich - unarmed, starved and fearful. Their wives, children and elderly parents were murdered by gas. Their only crime was that God gave them lives and that they were Jews, or other undesirables.

Around eight thirty, there is a sudden hush in the camp.

The marching band at the gate plays "Home Sweet Home" and now the two men appear. They are tied together by their legs. Their faces are black from coal and sweat. They march slowly, followed by SS men with weapons pointing at their backs. George and Manny carry a sign crudely written on a cardboard. It reads "HURRAH WIR SIND SCHON WIEDER DA": "Hurrah here we are again."

Now they stop at barrack thirteen. This is the punishment cell. It is the only barrack with a court yard, or more precisely, there is a wooden fence between it and the rest of the camp. So that others could not see! The gate is now open, and the two men are thrown in. The inmates of barrack thirteen, about two hundred of them stand in rows of five, now at full attention as the small party enters. The Camp Commander closes the gate.

The Camp Commander issues an order for the "bench". The bench is immediately produced and set down in the centre of the yard. Whenever it was pulled out, shivers ran up the backs of all present. The penalized man would bend down on the bench, his arms and legs tied to it. With his pants down, the condemned man would be flogged and he would count loud each blow coming down on him. Each blow, with a log, was like an electric shot hitting the entire body. After 15 blows the flesh became raw, after twenty five blood was flowing. This was the middle ages in modern days!

The punishment today was extraordinary. For defying the Great Reich by trying to escape. For defying the great leader "Der Fuhrer" by trying to escape. For claiming a right to life by trying to escape. The Nazis were angry: For Stalingrad, for Normandy, for their ultimate defeat!

George was first. He was brave and vowed himself not to make a sound to appear pleading. He received one hundred and twenty five blows. Several SS men took turn at the beating. George counted to seventy and then just screamed. Then he collapsed and was thrown aside and left bleeding.

Manny was next. He knew, just like all these watching this spectacle that his punishment would be worse! He defied the Great Reich. He defied the Great Leader and he was a Jew. All the animal hate of the Camp Commander and the other SS men; all their anger for the bombed German cities and the final defeat of the One Thousand Year Reich were now directed at that slight man. Manny was stretched out on the bench. His arms and legs were tied to it. Four SS men, big and well fed, took turns to hit and they hit hard. After one hundred and twenty blows the real punishment started. He was thrown on the ground. With long sticks, perhaps poles is a better description, he was now beaten over his entire body and his head. One of the posts broke and the angry SS man kicked and stamped and beat with his fists. With his clothes completely torn off, Manny was bleeding heavily, his eyes were

punctured. Pus was coming out of his head. His face took on a frightful aspect. This was no longer a man but a bloody rag. Inhuman sounds emitted from his torn lungs.

"Genug!" Enough, shouts the Commander. "Get a doctor." A doctor arrives. The two men, close to death were put on a stretcher and taken into the barrack. With crude medicine and dressings the doctor spent the whole night with them.

George was up in a week hobbling on crutches. Manny was close to death for several days and was attended to by the doctor. The doctor, one of the inmates was told by the Commander that if the beaten men would die, the doctor would also die. Manny and George were guarded day and night. They were given extra ration of food. After three weeks, Manny, with a cane could get up and take a few steps. In another ten days he was well enough to march. And march he did. So did Manny.

It was the middle of September. The chimneys of Birkenau were no longer spouting the ugly smoke. The last group, the hundred of thousands of Hungarian Jews, had gone through the chimneys. The work was done. The Russian army was approaching; we could hear the artillery and see distant fire at night. The Nazis destroyed the crematoria. So the world would never know.

George and Manny were walking again.

Gallows were set up near the gate in the Mannerlager.

Two men in pajamalike uniforms were marched to the gallows. Several high ranking officers arrived from Berlin to witness the cowardliness of the Third Reich. Their buttons, decorations and medals and their high polished boots attested to their superiority.

The Commander read the decree, signed by Himmler, the great criminal, equalled only by Hitler.

In a civilized society, the condemned are given comfort by a clergyman, a cigarette or a moment to clear their minds. These sadistic butchers were not satisfied to hang the two. They wanted everyone to see. The entire camp had to march past the gallows to see for themselves as if it was really necessary to see the unmasked cruelty and inhumanity of those who would rule the world.

I was fourteen years old at that time.

And I survived to be a witness and that is why I have described here the incident, in Birkenau of the two men marched into the camp, with a sign reading "Hurrah wir sind schon wieder da" and their execution.

CAUGHT

Finally, I was caught.

Like every escaped convict, I knew all along it was only a matter of time. It had taken them a long time, but I never had any doubt they would get me. Just like Raskolnikoff, I was walking through the city streets, contemplating a confession. Always had a coin in my hand, and sometimes my hand was on the telephone to turn myself in.

My life was not to be a full span - yet I have outlived most of my contemporaries, at least those who shared my guilt. For hours each day, I thought of acting. Then, evening came and I postponed it till tomorrow, or perhaps the next day. I ran sweating, looking behind and in front. Yes, today they would get me for sure.

But perhaps I can stall another day. Was living that sweet?

And time went on.

Sometimes, for a short time, I thought perhaps the whole thing was a mistake. A dream. A bad dream as though in fact it had never happened, and I was free like all these happy people around me.

I had travelled on buses and subway trains. Always watching myself, like a hawk. At that time I was young and the people around me, mostly clerks, business people,

salesladies, were older. Lately, however, most faces become younger and much younger. My face, my hair became grey.

At first I was alone, very.

But then I acquired possessions. They were lent to me. Wife, children, a home.

I began to count. The change in my pocket. The number of days till my wedding. Will I see my children out of their crib? In high school, in university?

God was good to me. He tried to compensate, to make good again. But I never forgot, not for a moment, not even at night. How many days, months, years, and now decades since I stood naked in front of him, Dr. Mengele, who was playing God. This was in the dirt of life. His high black shoes were polished, his fingernails were polished. The two seconds I stood in front of him were a lifetime. A lifetime I still live.

Sometimes I contacted the agents, but never told them all. Afraid to confess. The agents hid behind their telling names: Mr. Gardener, Mr. Earnest, Mr. Discord, Mr. Barker, and Dr. Canceroff. "It is not time yet. Go and enjoy yourself. We have your number." They kept reassuring me. Did they work for them or for me?

I was back on the streets. Then I thought: God really tried to make up.

My family, music, friends, travel, love, gardening.

When I was struck suddenly, a few years ago, early in the morning, in my bedroom, and taken away, someone interfered. They released me, but the warning was clear.

My friend, Macek, we were together, and for forty years played chess, silently. There was nothing to say. He refused to play the game any longer. Could no longer wait. He shut the garage door and turned on the gas.

Now I am calm. The interrogations were long and painful. I gave in quickly. Confessed everything and implicated no one. The end cannot be far.

DREAMS

My friend, you ask me whether I had dreams and whether I remember them. Were they horrid or pleasant?

You ask me about my dreams of forty years ago.

Pleasant or horrid?

Was what happened at the time, forty years ago, reality or a dream? Dreams are man's reflection of reality, distorted, twisted, darkened and fantasized.

What happened to us in Birkenau could not have been a dream, because our capacity to dream is limited by the accumulation of centuries of consciousness. There was nothing that my ancestors or yours, my friend, had endured, had seen or God forbid had inflicted on others that would have remained in our subconscious.

Yes, it was reality, unbelievable as it is.

A long night.

Eight hundred men, in the "Family Camp" are resting, six to a bed on three tier bunkers. If one turns, he disturbs the two on his sides. The blankets covering them are thin and torn. It is wintertime and the stove is cold. You are afraid to sleep because rats gnaw at your thin body. You itch all over as hundreds of lice crawl over you. Yesterday, you stood scantily dressed most of the day-- another day-- ankle deep in cold mud; nobody smiles, few people exchange words.

You are fourteen years old, and there is no sunshine. Your father, a doctor, was beaten up because lice were taking over. In medical school they did not teach you what to do when the Nazis take over. When rats and lice eat men.

A long night.

It was the last one for Pier. I call him that because he was a sad looking young man, with pale face and large eyes that gave the appearance of a Pierrot. He spoke softly but I did not understand him. Only his suffering.

Pier did not lie on the bunk with the others tonight. He was permitted to "sleep" on the concrete stove which stretched along the barrack. Feverish, he shook all over. He coughed, at first lightly, but then continuously and deeper. Pier gasped for air, like a drowning man. Someone passed him an eating bowl, the type assigned to everyone for his daily soup ration. Pier spat into the pot, he urinated into it, he vomited into it and when he started to throw up blood the contents turned ugly red.

It was an endless night. Pier's wailing spread through the full length of the barrack.

"Time to get up, Honza." It was my mother. I lay in a bed with white sheets. I wore my favourite flannel pajamas. It was spring time and birds were chirping outside of the windows. Mother passed me a clean shirt.

Then I woke up.

Pier lay sprawled on the floor. Someone covered him with a dirty blanket. He was dead.

The reality for him was over.

PALM READING

Palm reading to predict the future is a risky business, especially if you are fourteen years old and live with a constant threat to your life.

It was in Flossenbourg, March 1945. The war was already over for many in Europe, but not for me and the remnants...

Flossenbourg was a K.Z. Lager, a concentration camp in Nazi Germany, and I was an inmate there. This was the cruelest spot on earth and few people made it alive out of there. There were no gas chambers there but living conditions - did I say living? - were most miserable.

The winter was bitterly cold. Sleeping quarters were crowded beyond the limit and full of lice. The daily ration consisted of a chunk of bread and a bowl of thin soup. Yet we lived from day to day, worked and stood endlessly, freezing, out of doors. One cold night I saved half of my bread ration for the next day. I put it carefully into my "esschus", the eating pot, covered it with a small rag and slept on it. I should have known better! In the morning the bread was gone.

Another miserable day followed. We could hear guns from the front. What good did it to us? Will we ever make it out of these barracks surrounded by barbed wire?

Most of my fellow prisoners were older men - in their

twenties.

"Let me tell your future, little boy," said my bunkmate one evening. Maybe he was the one who had eaten my bread a few days earlier. "No, thanks." I said. Living from day to day was hard enough. If he told me I would get out of this hell, I would not believe it; and if he told me I would not, I could not take it.

The next day he came back. "Let me read your future." For sure he wanted to pay me for the bread he stole from me.

"Fine," I said, giving him my hand. He looked at it and at me thoughtfully. He touched my wrinkled palm. He concentrated for a few moments. I saw a smile on his face.

"I see a number four," he said, "Maybe forty, or forty-four. How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"You are a young boy. You will live." He said after a while.

I ran away from him. It was all I could take.

Forty days later I was free.

This happened forty years ago.

MY SWEATER

This is about my warm bulky sweater. It has such a beautiful design with white, red and grey diamonds.

I don't remember how it came to me. It was probably just thrown at my frail body as my turn came for the allotment of winter clothing. The winter of 1943 was severe and I was a Jew in Auschwitz. Thirteen years old and lucky to be alive. In the "Family Camp". The "Family Camp" in Auschwitz, where most were selected for death on arrival, was a short-lived fraud by the Nazis, so we could send out postcards saying "We are alive and together."

My sweater gave me comfort. It had long sleeves and a turtleneck. Some grandmother, in Poland or Hungary, probably sat patiently for many hours knitting for her grandson. The boy most likely did not need it anymore....

I wore it all the time. Day and night. My friends must have envied it. It had broad shoulders and the wool was so soft. It hung loose over my once chubby but now thin frame.

I saw my mother once a day for fifteen minutes. She had tears in her eyes most of the time. She had not taught me about the German Nazis, concentration camps or lice.

My body became itchy, so I scratched a lot. So what, other people also scratch. There was little water to wash in and it was always cold. There were three hundred of us, men

and boys, in a barrack made of wood. Six slept in a double bed in three-tiered bunks. Food was dished out once a day - a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread to last you all day and a bit of warm water called tea in the morning. I had forgotten what it was like to sleep in pajamas in a warm bed. I slept in my sweater. I rolled over many times and scratched a lot. One day I noticed a large ugly bug on my sleeve. I squashed it and there was another one and another. Horrified, I tore my sweater off. There were hundreds of them - lice - every inch was full and they soared ahead. Tiny eggs were set deep in the wool.

With vengeance like they were my tormentors the Nazis, I pounded with my fists, I squeezed with my nails, I stomped all over the sweater, stamping my feet. Kill those creatures! They did not deserve my venom, but what did I do to deserve being taken from my home at the age of twelve and being thrown into this hell...

Well, I came out and now forty-three years later at a garage sale at my neighbours' I bought a beautiful red, white and grey diamond sweater which brought my memories back to the dark nights of 1943.

GOLEM, UPDATE

PART I

HISTORY

It is because the old Maharal, Rabbi Loew of Prague has been dead four hundred years, his grave in the old cemetery overgrown and knocked down through neglect, the Altneuschul, a thousand years old, deserted, even on Friday night. The spirit that reigned in the Old City, within stone walls and gates had gone. The walls were demolished a hundred years ago and the inhabitants of the Ghetto, the Jews, had moved into the New Town and further across the river Vltava into the suburbs.

The Church no longer threatened the Jews and the Synagogue was no longer a place of daily thanksgiving but a place for special occasions. High ceilings, gold candelabra and a beautiful ark with curtains made of satin, adorned the sanctuary. A cantor with a voice similar to Caruso, chanted composed melodies; a rabbi clothed like a 16th Century monarch, oversaw the congregation.

The Altneuschul was barren. Upstairs in the attic, a pile of stones and rubbish - the remains of the Golem, a mute, over-sized man servant, made of clay and stones - a creation of the famed Rabbi Loew. The Golem, when called upon, would protect the Jews in the Ghetto from attacks and defamation.

Rabbi Loew, the Maharal, was respected by all, and the king, Rudolph, called him to attend at the High Castle to advise on matters of State. From the Castle, high above the river, he could look down at the town, full of towers and steeples. When danger threatened his people, the Rabbi would consult with his wise men and send off the Golem on a rescue mission, which was always successful.

But I already said we have moved ahead: Four hundred years. A lot of grey water passed under the many bridges of Prague. The High Castle, finally completed, was now home of the President. The kings had all had their say and were swept away by a new regime. It looked so promising. The wise old President ruled justly and his motto was "Truth will Prevail."

But it was not to be.

As the people of Prague, including the Jews, began to prosper, their abilities and energy outstripped the technology. The physical resources hidden in the earth, the unbridled power of the sun and stars beyond; the abilities of men, if combined would ensure the coming of the Messiah. But greed, envy, the great gap between rich and poor, created hate on a base of human degradation. Not only were men set against one another, but State rose against State to grab for itself that which was meant for all.

When the aging President in the High Castle sent out emissaries into the world, out of his country as well as to

its towns and villages and they reported to him, he despaired. The freedom released only recently became a monster. Far too much and too early. People in the world were not ready. If he had consulted, as I am sure he would have with the Maharal, he would have predicted a great disaster... A defeated nation, in the middle of Europe, defeated physically as well as spiritually had begun to plan a revenge on its neighbours. As the world had never known! With unlimited greed and ambition to cause evil fed by hate, they created themselves a monster. This monster, unlike the Golem, who carried out the instructions of his master to save and protect life, this monster used his followers to spread death and destruction. His followers were only too happy to carry out his cruel orders. In huge rallies he spewed out his hates, and the descendants of Rabbi Loew of Prague, the Jews, were at the top of his list.

"Send the Golem to grab the little man and bring him here for a trial," that is what the Maharal would have advised. "His evil is too great."

"Send the Golem to the basement in his palace where he plots a war with his generals to overrun the world and kill all in their way."

"Send the Golem for him while he is putting his final touches to appoint himself Emperor of the world."

"Send the Golem to grab the plans for the gas chambers."

Only silence.

Only silence.



PART II

INSIDE BIRKENAU - JULY 1944

A few of us still alive. Among them a little woman, now grey haired, a small body and deep eyes. Her cheerful life as a young girl had vanished. Mother. She sits with her two sons on the edge of a bunk bed in a steamy barrack where 600 souls, just like herself, tired and weak, depressed, await the trucks, dark and dirty, to take them to their death. They all know: screams, pleading, weeping and the thirty minute trip in the dark trucks and then... There is no help. Erna, Mother, tries to be cheerful. Her hope is that her sons will live to see freedom and life!

A sudden commotion. Boots, shouting, roar of trucks. The hour is here. "Out! Heraus! Schnell!"

Quickly, Mother kisses the boys, who are allowed out by the side entrance. This is the end. My dear Mother, why are they doing this to you? You, so kind and gentle, who never harmed anyone.

I call on God. I summon the spirit of the old man in the High Castle. I plead with Rabbi Loew of Prague. Send the Golem! Do it now!

And, as Mother struggles into the truck, in complete darkness, she is suddenly grabbed by a large man. Erna trembles in the cold arms of the monster. The Golem. "This

is incredible," she whispers to herself. They fly through space and through time. Time has lost its meaning. Erna now sits in a pew, with people all around her. They are dressed well, young and old alike. She recognizes that she is in a Synagogue, beautiful and warm just like the one in her hometown.

The cantor chants in a sweet voice.

"Blessed are you, Lord of God, King of the Universe, who created joy and gladness, groom and bride..."

This is a wedding. A young couple, the girl, slight with deep eyes. "She looks like me" exclaims Erna. No one can see her, nor hear her.

Now the Rabbi speaks.

"Let violence be gone, let the day come soon, when war will be forgotten, hunger be no more and at last all will live in freedom."

Erna stares ahead. Let this moment last forever.

At this time the Golem grabs the grey haired woman, whom nobody noticed. They rush back in space, they rush back in time. A moment later, Erna is back in the darkness inside the truck carrying her to the gas chamber. Erna is no longer despairing, her sore body does not hurt. She now knows her own life was not a waste. She now believes that the last minutes of life are not the end.

Written on the occasion of the Wedding of Carole and Pini.

BIRKENAU RECOLLECTIONS

In 1990.

How should I recollect now, in 1990, events that took place more than 45 years ago? Why revive memories that are best forgotten as if they did not happen at all? But the events did happen and denying them does no good. So I will only set down the highlights, impressions and moods of those days in 1943 and 1944 in Birkenau. This was the extermination camp, just outside of Auschwitz. I was thirteen when I got there, torn away from my home, but still with my parents and an older brother.

The general mood was one of anxiety of the unknown and fears of the known. Darkness and light. I think in colours: black and grey. If the sun shone, it did so through a dark cloud. If there was any joy, it was always filtered by fear.

We arrived at night from Ghetto Terezin, after 36 hours in filthy, windowless cattle cars. Some people died on the way. My father tried to help those seriously ill or dying. Loaded into a truck, at the nearby railway stop, we rode until we were dumped into a barrack for delousing and showering. This was called a sauna. Later, a new railroad station was built, almost directly into the camp, but when we arrived in the winter of 1943 there were the ugly trucks.

Told to undress and leave all our possessions on a pile, we suspected the worst, but did not know what that could be. I gave up my two possessions- Bar Mitzvah gifts - a watch and a pen. Cold wind was blowing into the barrack when we were herded under luke warm showers. I averted my eyes when I saw my father in the nude beside me. Suddenly a strange event, like a terrible dream, happened. Two men were hurtled into the barrack under a shower. They looked like skeletons. When a piece of soap was thrown at them, they thought it was food and began to struggle over it. They fought like tigers. Is this what we would be reduced to? In our loving homes, we had been taught to treat others as equal. After the showers we were brutally shaven all over our bodies and our arms then were tattooed. I received a six digit number that I still have after 46 years. I now became Concentration Camp number 168329.

The next six months we spent in the Family Camp. "The Familienlager." What was the family camp in Auschwitz? Whose nightmarish idea was it to pack families- children, men and women and old people and the sick into the long wooden barracks, where they would sleep on three tiered bunk beds, six to a bed? Why send them to a camp one kilometre long and a few hundred meters wide, fenced in by electrically charged barbed wire, with similar such camps on each side?

Here was the sideshow of Auschwitz with only an address named Birkenau bei Neu Berun, OB (Upper Silesia). Why put us into a camp when most of those who arrived here never saw light again within one hour of their miserable welcome by SS men with

dogs and canes? For a reason known only to the highest of the high in Berlin, this crowd of three thousand new arrivals were put into this camp. And what did we encounter there? That in the muddy, cold and flea infested enclosure, there were already inmates, who had arrived there just like we did from Terezin three months earlier. The encounter with them was emotional. We hugged and questioned. What is life here like? What do you eat? And where are the thousands of others who had left earlier? Where could they be? And what are those huge factories just outside the camp? One, two, three, four of them. And why that heavy black smoke coming out of the wide chimneys? We soon found out in disbelief. Those were the gas chambers and crematoria which swallowed the living. Some days all appeared quiet and then other days the rush and smoke filled the sky. This was on the days that transports were arriving. Several months after our arrival a train station was built at this address - Birkenau bei Neu Berun. More people were dumped out of the cattle trains. By then all doubts had disappeared. The smoke came from the flesh and bones of the burned bodies. Jews. Also some Gypsies but mostly Jews. When the going became tough and the factories could not cope, they burned them in dug up large holes. There were several such dumps and the smoke rose day and night.

So what were we doing in the family camp? Standing for hours each day and being counted. Waiting for the evening when we lined up with a eating pot which was filled with thin soup. Then a chunk of bread was thrown at us. After that we had free time and could meet with our friends or family. Men lived in separate barracks from women and the children stayed either with mothers or the older boys with fathers. My father was a doctor and like others of that refined profession was to maintain the hygienic cleanliness in the camp. In other words they were responsible for keeping the lice in line. At one point all the doctors were punished by having to run and do push ups deep in mud. I remember that cruel SS man Buntrock known to all as "Bulldog". He kicked and slapped at random and carried a cane with which he hit hard.

The days were long in the first winter. They were cold and dark. Our feet froze in our thin socks and wooden shoes. How can I forget the night during which surgeons operated on the frozen feet of one of our friends, a 13 year old boy? His screams must have reached Hell.

Sometimes light shone in darkness. That was when over factories located a few kilometres away known as "Buna" rose large balloons that looked like Zeppelins. They rose high to catch into chains strung between them bombs dropped from the airplanes of the allies. Sometimes deep into the night we could hear and see the most beautiful birds, by the hundreds, carrying bombs to maim and kill the monsters that threw us into this hell. We knew that those were the Americans flying to the approaching Russian front. None however came to destroy the gas chambers!

I must say something about the heroes in our midst. About the darkhaired young man, Freddie Hirsh, who had organized athletic meets in Terezin and who taught us to have strength of spirit. Now in this camp in the muddy fields " bei Neu Berun "

Freddie somehow squeezed a bit of feeling out of the stone called the Camp Kommander and arranged that the small children were permitted to spend the cold days indoors. A portion of one barrack was set aside for us to sit on benches in small groups and the older boys and girls, the "madrachim", played games with us or told us stories. We sang songs, because children, even in a concentration camp, had some spirit left. Someone brought a tennis ball into the camp and we boys divided into teams and played soccer at the very edge of the camp.

Of the thirty barracks one was a latrine and one an infirmary. Both of these barracks stank and were full of misery. Once a month we were handed a post card and a pencil. We wrote greetings to our families back in Terezin or at home. "We are well and together with parents" In the original- "...bin gesund, zusammen mit den Eltern." Each post card bore the name of the sender, his date of birth and the location of the camp. "Arbeitslager (labour camp) Birkenau Bei Neu Berun O.S." We dated these greetings as directed, sometimes six or more weeks ahead. Certainly an ugly omen!

One day the sun shone brightly and we all were overjoyed even though our fear was great. There was one decent SS man around. A Yugoslav German, his name was Pystek. He never kicked any of us nor slapped our faces. He even, yes he did, I remember, smiled at us. On this particular day, the story spread quickly, this Pystek and an inmate in the camp, one of us, rode bicycles wearing SS uniforms out of the camp through the main gate. Their comrades at arms saluted "Heil Hitler" as they passed the gate. Now I know this is true, although whether I actually saw them on the bicycles or whether it was talked about and pictured by all in the camp, that I just don't remember. The two got as far as the nearest railway station, got on the train and rode away. What is even more amazing is that this man Pystek returned into the camp soon after to try his luck once more. This time to take out a beautiful girl that he had fallen in love with. Pystek was caught and no one ever heard a word about him again. His partner by the name Lederer made his way to Prague and later joined the underground fighting the Germans. While the hard winter withered and spring approached a rumour started to spread through the camp. Transport! This was the fearful word. And it became reality. We were all given postcards to write. They were dated as usual weeks ahead. Then came the date known to all of us, March 7th. It was the date of Masaryk's birthday and we all worshipped that great man. Whether by coincidence or not, all those who had been in the camp when we arrived in December were gassed, killed and burned. The attempt to deceive them by transporting them at night in sealed trucks and circling around the camp may have calmed some but the end was imminent. At the last moment, people began to fight, with bare hands and a few sticks. They were beaten terribly before their death. We all heard that before their last breath they sang the "Hatikvah", the Hebrew song of hope and "Kde domov muj?", (where is my home), the Czechoslovak national anthem. More than three thousand died six months after their arrival. Only a few escaped - a few tradesmen who were considered irreplaceable and several pairs of

twins on whom Mengele was conducting experiments. That wonderful man Freddie Hirsh would not allow others to take his life. He committed suicide just before the end. I and my family and all others in our transport remained in the camp. In May another transport arrived from Terezin. Like we before they were given numbers tattooed on the left arm. These numbers had prefixes A or B. We embraced the newcomers who were shocked like we had been several months earlier. I recollect walking on the muddy road with one of my roommates from L417 in Terezin. A gentle boy with a beautiful handwriting who had printed our weekly newspaper in room 9. I broke to him the unthinkable, the unbelievable, that those large chimneys that were spouting smoke day and night were the factories of death.

Spring of 1944 arrived. On one rainy day I approached the electrically charged barbed wires dividing our camp from the neighbouring Gypsy camp where a boy, perhaps twelve years old was calling to me. Do I want some mustard and if I do I should meet him next day and bring a piece of bread. So I saved my bread that night and brought it to the wires next day. The boy passed his hand through the wire, grabbed the bread and handed me a potful of mustard. As soon as I held the pot I knew I was taken. Under a thin layer of mustard there was mud and sand.

The camp was now crowded. We spent hours outdoors being counted. My brother became ill with a typhus, but miraculously recovered. I suffered like many others with soreness in my mouth due to lack of vitamins. My mother was often ill as she had some stomach ailment already before the war. She was very thin and tired all the time.

The American bombers now flew nightly and we heard stories of the invasion by English and American armies in France. With increased intensity transports were arriving and gassing continued. Day and night, the killing went on. Only a few people were given a chance to live; most went out with the smoke. Now we could see clearly men, women and children advancing towards the large crematoria. No one who entered ever left those buildings. The drama of separation of those destined for death from the few permitted to live, the feared "selection," took place on the railway platform less than a kilometre from our camp.

The one question we asked, when is our turn, was answered early in the summer. Again rumours were flying. We wrote postcards dated August: "We are well and together". This time it appeared that workers were needed in the factories producing deadly weapons and camp inmates could be used. Selections began. My father and older brother left first. I see them marching out of the Familienlager. This time it was summer, dry and hot. The sun was shining through the clouds of smoke. The men spent a week in the adjoining Mannerlager and from there went to Blechhammer, a camp servicing a nearby plant.

Then came the younger women. What happened to them I don't know, but I do know that my mother was not among them. She failed the selection test and her fate was sealed. She ended up with the remainder of the Familienlager in the gas chambers.

On the 6th of July, the boys between 12 and 14 lined up in front of Mengele, whose title doctor was a historical abomination. How do I remember the date ? " Wie alt bist du " he asked. How old was I on that day ? Fourteen years and one month. I said so in as a confident voice as I could muster and he sent me to the right while I noticed the two smaller boys preceding me he sent to the left. There were 89 boys thus saved from the fate of those who remained. Next day we were led into the Mannerlager, the adjoining compound for men. Here we stayed until evacuation in January 1945.

Only a few highlights remain in my memory. We were put into barrack 13 which was the punishment cell. There was a connecting wall between it and barrack 11, where the men of the Sonderkommando slept. These were the men whose tasks were to work in the gas chambers. They were strong Jewish men. No one had ever dreamed even at the worst time of the world of what these men had to do and they did not talk about it. To us, the 13 and 14 year old boys, they were kind and when some of us sneaked into their barrack against orders they fed us with food brought into Birkenau by those who ended up in gas. One day, a boy whose name if I remember correctly was Pauli, the smallest of us was caught coming back from the Sonderkommando barrack. He was punished by being put into a box which stood in the yard and left there all night without food or air and which was too small for him either to lie or sit in. His screams and whines pierced our hearts. From then on, no one dared to visit barrack 11 again.

The 89 boys slept towards the end of the barrack. At 4:30 we were woken up by a Polish Capo whose name was Metek. With a stick he banged on the bunks singing " Stavai, stavai, Kurva tvoje mat " "Get up, you whore children." In fact, he was not a bad guy. The Blockeltester, or leader of the barrack was Bednarek, a German criminal, who had been in camps for 7 years by then. He was a man who could be cruel at times and giving other times.

With us in the punishment barrack were Jews and Aryans, mixing together in their miseries. I remember particularly the Russian officers in our barrack. They were impressive. Tall and broad shouldered, they smiled at us and talked to us. At night, they sang their patriotic songs, that made us shiver. Soon after our arrival in this camp, block leaders and Capos came to choose runners, the "Laufers." These boys, the ones whose looks appealed to the "prominents" in the camp were assigned to duties as errand boys. They were given fancy outfits and high boots and were allowed to grow their hair. They were moved out to other barracks. Most of the rest of us were assigned to the "Rollwagen Kommando." We became human horses, pulling a large wooden wagon, or pushing it from behind, loading and unloading it with snow in the winter and coal in the summer. We worked inside the camp and outside too. When we left the camp through the well guarded gate we were marching (pulling a wagon) to a music band consisting of renowned musicians including the conductor Karel Ancerl.

The work was tiring and the hours were long. The stronger boys pulled harder than the weaker ones. We did not

exploit or steal from each other and never fought. We were fed only at the end of the day, when we returned into our barrack. We lined up and waited. "Appel" was the counting that was done before the meal. We stood in attention sometimes for hours. When you moved you were struck by an SS man. After the Appel, we would line up with an "esschus" an eating bowl in our hands waiting for our daily meal, which consisted of a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread. Sometimes there was a bit of margarine and marmalade with the bread. In the morning we lined up again for a bowl of thin tea. On Sundays the soup was a pea soup with chunks of bacon floating in it, and was served at noon. After our evening meal we sat around on a long chimney which was in the centre of the entire barrack. We talked or dreamed about the future or played word games. We would discuss politics or religion. Our backgrounds were varied. Some were from middle class homes, a few of us from religious Jewish homes. Most of us spoke Czech, some German and a few Dutch. Bedtime came early. There were six of us to a wide bunk, three tiers high. In bed we chattered and some did what all 14 year old boys have always done. Then we wrapped ourselves tightly in a thin blanket so that rats which surfaced at night would bother us little.

At the foot of the Mannerlager, just across from the kitchen was a water reservoir, resembling a swimming pool. Going into the water was strictly prohibited, but as the saying goes "boys will be boys" and sometimes when it was hot and the SS men appeared in a good mood some brave boy would take a dive into the water. One such hot day - and that day two of the boys, Ludek and Gerhard, recollect better than I - almost ended the life of Gerhard. That slim, blond boy, who had been deported from his beloved Holland to Terezin and then to this hell, this quiet boy decided to take a quick swim in the reservoir. As he started his way out of the water on the slippery walls he was suddenly spotted by an SS man. The beast, either for sport or punishment, refused to allow Gerhard out of the tank. He stepped on his hands and beat him back with a stick. For the Nazis, who first took you out of your home, took away your parents, put you into a concentration camp, the slightest infraction of any rule was punished by the most severe decree. Gerhard started to panic, he pleaded with the SS man. Soon, he began to lose strength. Panting he started to swallow water. Ludek, who was nearby watched in horror. Then the SS man disappeared just as quickly as he had come. That moment Ludek dived in and pulled Gerhard out of the dreadful pool. He stayed with him and took him into our barrack.

When Ludek and Gerhard met in my home 43 years later, neither of them knew that one of them almost drowned and was rescued by the other. Gerhard then, in 1987 came from Holland to write down our recollections from Birkenau. When Ludek started to tell about the event, Gerhard became pale and his breathing became heavy. He began to choke like he had done in that cool water in the Birkenau pool. He had to leave the room, but when he returned the two boys, now not far from sixty years old embraced.

That summer was hot. The sun shone through the constant

clouds spewing out of the crematoria. Hundreds of thousands came; several transports of sealed cattle trains came each day. Out went the Jews of Hungary.

In that heat two men tried to run away. Their chances of success were negligible and they were caught. There we stood on an Appel, being counted, when they were thrown in the yard adjacent to our barrack. The two men, tied to each other were carrying a sign, which read, "Hurrah wir sind schon wieder da" (Hurrah, here we are again). At first they were given the statutory blows with sticks over their buttocks and their entire bodies. They each received one hundred and twenty five blows. Several SS men took part in this. After that the brutal SS men tore into them with their boots and large poles. One of the poles broke into two and that drove the savages to greater cruelty. Blood and pus came out of the bodies and heads of the two poor men. Not since the middle ages; no, I don't believe even then were such cruelties committed against men. Their squealing was inhuman. "Genug", shouted the Camp Commander then and the two almost dead bodies were left lying on the ground. The Commander called for a doctor, who was told to save the men. We all remember this. Several weeks later two gallows appeared at the front of the camp. All inmates had to watch the executions, but, yes, the boys of barrack 13 were allowed to stay inside the yard. This was one of the kindnesses which the Blockeltester Bednarek did for us.

Cooler weather and the fall came slowly for us. The nights became longer and the American bombers continued their daily flights. We heard about the advancing Soviet troops. At night we heard distant explosions. In October there was a revolt by the Sonderkommandos with weapons smuggled to them from a nearby armaments factory. After several hours of fighting, during which one of the four gas chambers was blown up, all of the 450 Jews were hunted down and shot. Several weeks later the remaining crematoria ceased to be used and the Nazis started to blow them up. To destroy evidence of their deeds! I have a vivid recollection of a brief visit inside one of the gas chambers. Our rollwagen commando was to pick some lumber out of the yard of the crematoria, which were partly in ruins. Quickly several of us ran inside the gas chamber. What we saw was a large dark hall made of concrete, which had thick columns inside the low ceiling. I picture it now when I enter one of our underground concrete garages which are under the large office buildings or apartments.

Cold nights and snow returned. The year 1945 came.

Out of the 89 boys, some were shipped out to other camps, but I think most were still together. The guns of the Red Army could now be heard distinctly. We knew that the end was in sight, but we also feared that for us many hurdles were still ahead. The gas chambers no longer posed a threat, but the next biggest fear was transports toward the unknown. For almost all, the unknown proved to be worse than feared. We were young and had not felt defeated yet. Each of us had a hope that next day our suffering would end. Just before the Red Army liberated Birkenau, we were shipped out. Each day of the next one hundred

turned out to be worse than the previous one. In snow, open coal cars, on endless transports and death marches, we began to fall.

Out of the 89 of us approximately thirty survived. We were among the youngest survivors- among the perhaps one hundred and fifty of children under fifteen- out of a million and a half Jewish children who lived to see the end of the dreadful war.

Now in 1990 we have lived another forty five years. We cannot celebrate in joy, because so many just as deserving as we did not make it. But we can celebrate because life to us at least was good and we have preserved that spirit, which had helped us during the days in Birkenau bei Neu Berun.

In May 1990, seventeen of us met at Kibbutz Givat Chaim in Israel to talk and thank for the fortune, which gave us life denied to so many.

Reunion in Israel- May 1990.

May 5th 1990 was a day to remember. The war in which so much happened to so many people came to an end forty five years earlier. It was a day, when in Israel at Kibbutz Givat Chaim about 400 visitors from the world met to recollect, to sing, to remember and to celebrate. This was the reunion of the Terezin inmates of 1942 to 1945. There were tears of sadness and joy.

Among these elderly people were the boys of Birkenau, with their wives or friends. Seventeen of us had spent part of our early teens between July 1944 and January 1945 in this camp, while the war was raging and the Nazis carried on their extermination of the Jewish people within our eyesight. There had been eighty nine of us, when Mengele selected us out of the Familienlager on July 6 of 1944. Perhaps 35 survived the war and after settled in all four corners of the world.

On May 6th we sat in a large room at the Kibbutz and told our stories. The sun was shining as we stood up to talk about our past and present. It was a day full of joy and emotion. We talked about our lives; what we had done once freedom returned to us. We all were happy to be alive and together for this occasion. Most of us brought our wives and talked about our children and grandchildren. We talked about what we had achieved and said a prayer for those who did not survive.

After our meeting, those of us visiting Israel returned to our hotel in the nearby town of Netanya. We spent the next few days at the sea or travelling throughout the beautiful country, admiring the sites and the people.

For Nora and me, it was our seventh trip to Israel. This time the emotions were even higher than previously, because of the few wonderful days we spent with our friends from the past.

We pledged to meet again.

POSTSCRIPT

Life is a rocky airplane trip. At the start, when it takes off, all shakes and the ride is precarious. Until you reach the cruising altitude, you are full of cares, you feel quite unwell, because you are really not sure, whether you should have boarded the flight. But by now you know, there is no turning back. So you settle down to make the best of it. You begin to enjoy it. Food is served, you talk to friends and there is entertainment. You know there is almost endless time before the trip will end. Yet, you worry that something may go wrong. There could be an explosion, which would end all suddenly, or the pilot could get sick and landing may have to be speeded up. Illness or an accident may shorten the trip. After a little drink, you relax. You forget about what could happen. So, the flight goes on and on. You may get fed up with your neighbour and move to another seat for a while or perhaps stay with your new fellow passenger till the end of the trip. After much time- and time in the air is sometimes slow and then it appears to speed up- you began to realize that the end is coming. The motors work slower. There is lethargy. You may start to worry that the end may be violent. You hope that the end of the trip will be quiet, not full of bumps and pain.

You know the end will come and you will just disappear into the unknown with all the passengers.

On my flight, which started off smoothly, there were terrible storms early in the flight. Although they lasted for a relatively short part of the trip, they were so devastating that most of my fellow passengers did not survive. But for a few, and I was one of them, the journey went on. I moved to another part of the craft and made new contacts. I tried not to think about, but could never forget the early storms. I did enjoy the trip, when the clouds cleared up. Among the remainder of the passengers, I made many friends; lasting contacts.

Now, I am approaching the slowing down phase. Clouds will soon begin to gather and possibly instruments will be used to ease the descent.

The end will come, for sure and hopefully it will be smooth.

Conclusion.

While the battles of ideology continued and intensified in my old homeland, Canada and life here took over for me. I was always aware of the struggles of other people in their lands and there was much which gave me sorrow.

As a new Canadian, I learned the ways of independence. This meant a job to help toward education, to obtain an education and to settle to a life as normal as could be hoped for. I did not become a medical doctor as I had dreamt of as a boy, but instead obtained a certificate in a respected profession as a Chartered Accountant. I worked steadily, earning a satisfactory living until my retirement in 1989, more than forty years after my arrival in Canada.

I did not give up my love of music and the arts. While young I read the major European authors, but never really became an educated man. The doubts in myself and humanity remained with me. The peaceful world which I have personally obtained never became reality for the world.

My greatest day was June 21 1958, when I met my life partner, Nora, whom I married one year later in a synagogue in a small Ontario town. She had come to Canada with her parents from Czechoslovakia just prior to the outbreak of the war. Now in 1991, I can look back in satisfaction on our lives, during which we brought into this world three wonderful daughters. We are now grandparents of two and a third one is on the way.

Nora and I have travelled together frequently, both on this continent and overseas, sometimes with our children and sometimes alone. Italy and Israel remain our favourite countries to visit. Italy because of its beautiful landscape, artistic achievements and way of life. For Israel our feelings are emotional: here is a land where our people have survived and thrived under such difficult circumstances. My heart was throbbing when during all our trips we started to descend over the narrow strip of the country arriving at the Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. We both wept when we saw the happy children at play in a Kibbutz, a life denied to so many Jewish children born in this century. Our own daughters have followed us in their love of travel and the special feelings for Israel.

For twenty-five years we lived in a good family home, while the children required it. Later we moved to an investment property. We have enjoyed our country home for many years. We love gardening, reading, Nora does handicrafts and we just enjoy being together.

While I worked in a government job, Nora was bringing up our children. She never used her University degree as a Hotel Manager, but applied her practical ways to look after our family. Her active mind was engaged in a variety of endeavours for the community. Since my retirement in 1989, we are both participating in many volunteer activities and we both use our skills in accounting and income tax to supplement our income.

God, whose existence I have not denied, who was harsh to so many others, and to whom I can pray only with great doubt, has been good to me.

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